

# LIVING MARXISM

**Midnight in  
the Century:**  
the debate  
continues

April 1991 No30 £1.80

# After Iraq



# WHO'S NEXT?

**When is an atrocity an acceptable act of war? • Now it's clear: Kuwait wasn't the issue • How the peace movement played into their hands • Is America beyond the Vietnam Syndrome?**

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PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

## Twin track

US secretary of state James Baker says that he has a twin-track strategy for the post-Gulf War period. As it happens, so do we. This month two themes dominate *Living Marxism*—and we expect both of them to feature prominently in our pages for some time to come.

The first theme is imperialism after the Gulf War. The US-led invasion of the Middle East has finished off Iraq, and started a new era of militarism which will affect the lives of us all in the years ahead. From recession in the West to atrocities in the third world, *Living Marxism* will continue to examine the causes and the consequences of the international crisis.

The second theme is the discussion of the future for revolutionary politics in today's dark age, a debate which has been provoked by Frank Richards' article 'Midnight in the Century', published in the December 1990 issue of *Living Marxism*. This month he expands on his arguments. Next month, it could be your turn to pursue the debate.

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**LIVING  
MARXISM**

APRIL 1991 3



## After Iraq, who's next?

**T**he Gulf conflict was a colonial war fought with the weaponry of the twenty-first century. Armed with their smart bombs, Cruise missiles, napalm and 'fuel-air explosive' devices (which suck the oxygen out of the lungs), the Americans and their allies massacred Iraq's ill-equipped army and demolished the impoverished country. Like the Victorian colonialists in Africa a century before, they won not because of superior civilisation, but thanks to their far superior capacity for barbarism.

In destroying Iraq, the American, British and allied governments destroyed their own excuses for the war. Who could now believe that a weak third world dictator like Saddam Hussein was ever a powerful 'new Hitler', capable of drowning the world in chemical weapons? How can Washington now pretend that its only aim was to free Kuwait from Iraqi control, when it is feverishly attempting to create a system of post-war states and alliances which would allow the USA to enslave the entire Middle East?

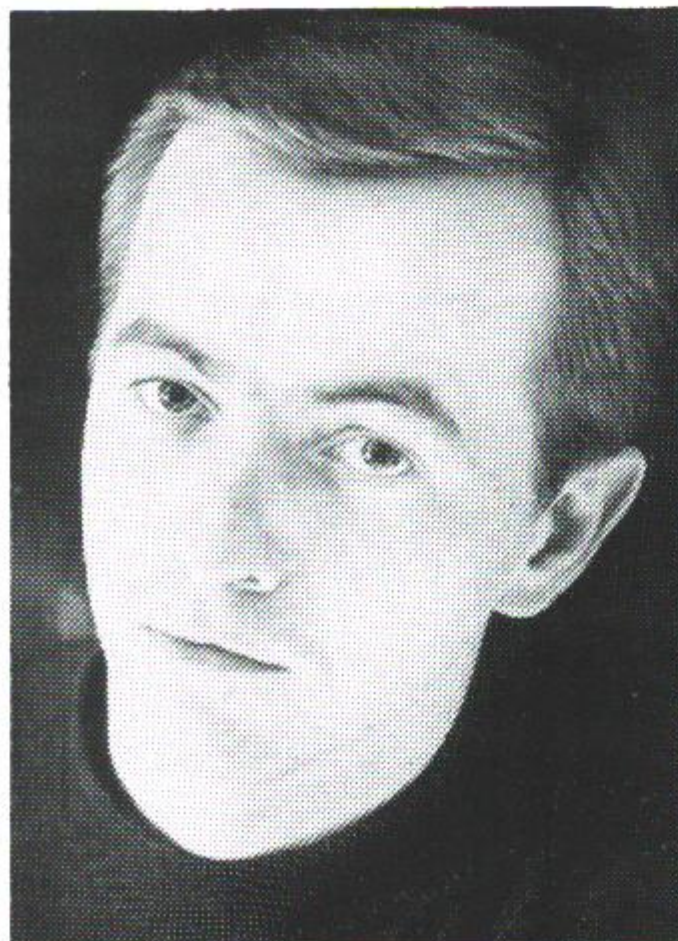
The Gulf War has demonstrated that

Western imperialism did not go out of fashion with the pith helmet. It is alive and kicking in the modern age. Which means that the ceasefire in the Gulf can only provide a temporary respite for the third world.

Imperialism involves far more than a single act of aggression against Iraq. It is an exploitative global system which divides the nations of the Earth: between a handful of great capitalist powers on one hand and the majority of other countries on the other; between the West and the third world; the oppressor states and the oppressed. In the early days of the imperialist age, from the end of the last century, the great powers were openly colonialist. For much of the last 50 years, however, the imperialists have been slightly more circumspect about the use of force, often seeking to dominate international affairs through indirect and diplomatic means. The Gulf War marks the end of that era, and the start of a new age of more aggressive imperialism.

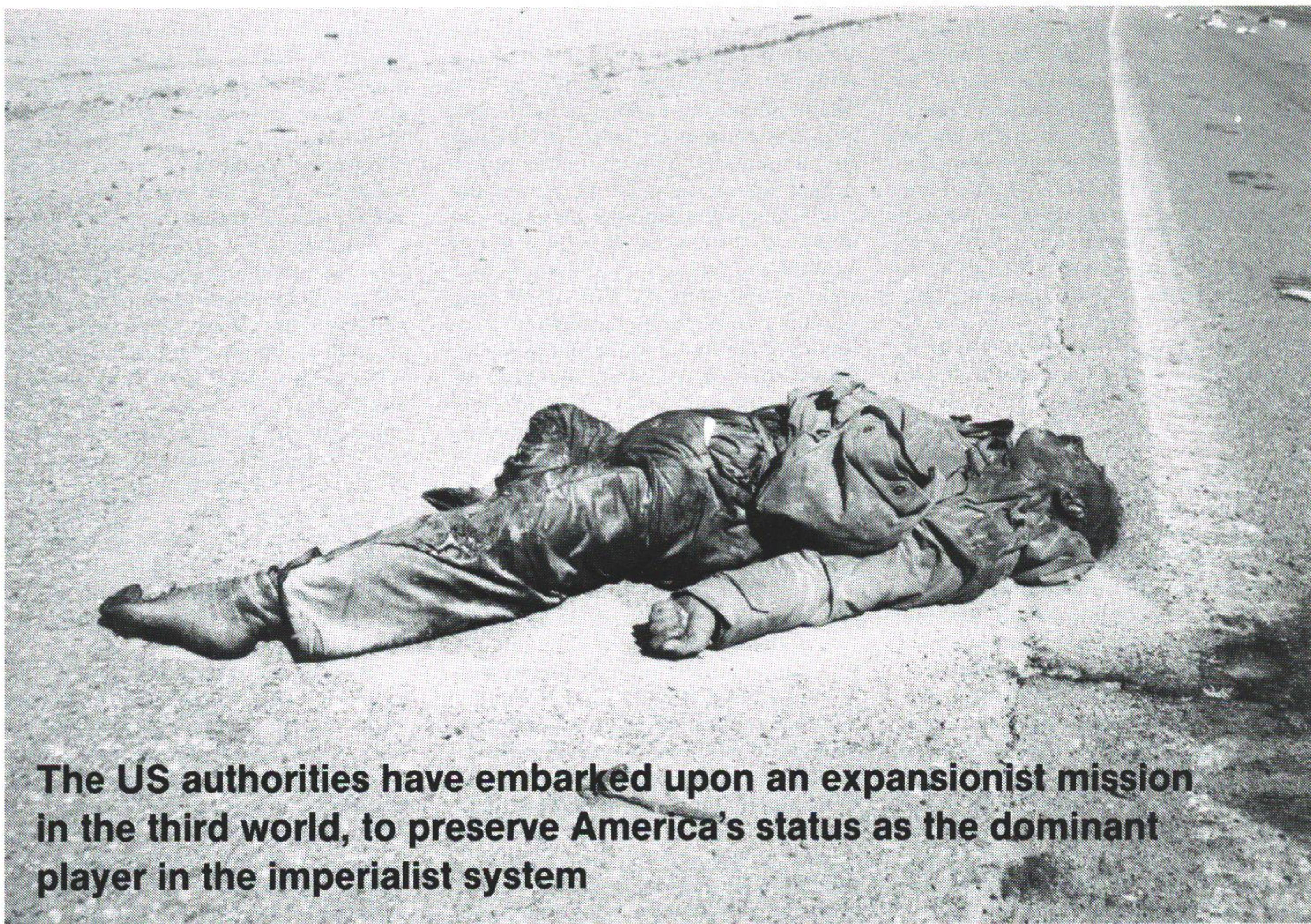
The drive to impose more direct control over the third world is re-emerging at the centre of US and British foreign policy. The end of the fighting in the Gulf is only the prelude to further conflicts. After Iraq, the question is, who's next?

The charred heap of Iraqi bodies on the



editor  
**mick hume**





**The US authorities have embarked upon an expansionist mission in the third world, to preserve America's status as the dominant player in the imperialist system**

Basra road is testimony to the leading role of the USA in making Western militarism more overt. The US authorities have embarked upon an expansionist mission in the third world, to preserve America's status as the dominant player in the imperialist system. America has been No 1 since it emerged from the Second World War economically, politically and militarily supreme. But its footing atop the pile has become less secure over the years, as the power of its industry and the dollar have declined in comparison to its major competitors.

The global authority of the USA has been called into question both by rebellious third world countries and by its Western allies. Washington worries most about pressure from the big capitalist nations, since a Germany or Japan can pose a comprehensive threat to American influence right around the globe. Yet the USA has so far proved wary of provoking a direct confrontation with its Western rivals. Weighed down by massive trade and budget deficits, the Americans need the cooperation of the more dynamic economic powers. Washington's concern is to consolidate its long-term leadership of the Western Alliance, not to create a short-cut to the third world war. So rather than tackling the Germans or Japanese head-on, the White

House seeks to assert its authority over the West *indirectly*, by demonstrating its power in the third world. This is now the driving force in US foreign policy which has carried it into the Gulf War and beyond.

When dealing with the Western allies, the USA has to observe the diplomatic niceties of top-table negotiations. In the third world, by contrast, Washington can demonstrate its authority as world policeman in the brutal style which it showed off against Iraq. The USA has the freedom to deal with an Arab ruler like Saddam or a Latin American like General Manuel Noriega in black-and-white terms, branding them as terrorists and madmen, and depicting US aggression as a crusade to defeat the forces of evil.

●  
By militarising its relations with the third world in this way, the USA is pressurising the other imperialist powers to support (and finance) America in its self-appointed role as protector of the Free World. Washington may no longer have the industrial clout to call all of the shots in intra-Western disputes over trade or finance. But once attention turns to military matters, American leadership remains unchallenged. By focusing the eyes

of the Western world on an alleged threat from the third world, the USA can assume the role of supreme allied commander once more. It is then well-placed to use its military leadership as a lever to extract economic and political concessions. Sending the B-52s to bomb Berlin as a way of forcing Germany to toe the American line may be out of the question for the moment, but sending them to bomb Baghdad is an acceptable short-term substitute.

The USA has just fought a bloody war in the third world at the expense of the peoples of the Middle East; yet its primary purpose was to influence the balance of global power, by reviving the Western Alliance. As such the Gulf crisis could become a model exercise for the future of American foreign policy. Which is why it is important to appreciate, as Kirsten Cale argues elsewhere in this month's *Living Marxism*, that Kuwait was never the central issue in George Bush's calculations about if and when to go to war in the Gulf. There is a far more powerful global dynamic at work in the White House, driving the USA towards the recolonisation of parts of the third world.

Mention of 'recolonisation' should not suggest that the 1990s will be an exact re-run of the 1890s. We are unlikely to see whole continents reoccupied by Western troops, or



new white settler communities deposited in third world countries, as they were a century ago. What the two ages have in common is the attempt by the imperialist powers to secure more direct control around the globe. There are many ways in which this can be done apart from classical colonialism; for example, in the Gulf today the USA is trying to create a permanent military infrastructure which will allow Western forces to move in hard and fast when necessary. But whatever form imperialist interference takes this time around, it is essentially a process of recolonisation which will further deprive the peoples of the third world of the ability to determine their own destinies.

● The crushing military victory over Iraq has created a sense of triumphalism in America's ruling circles. The Gulf crisis has allowed Washington to reassert its leadership of the Western Alliance and to show that, with the end of the Cold War, it has no competitors. There has been much talk of how the USA plans to bring peace to the Middle East, and to create a stable new world order under American hegemony. But before too long the world will have to face up to the fact that peace and stability are not on the agenda. Instead, US foreign policy is on course to become more and more militaristic in its attempt to maintain control of the unstable post-Cold War world.

The braggartly talk of a new world order is before its time—probably by several decades, if the history of how long these things have taken in the past is anything to go by. The Americans are certainly faced by a new world, but 'order' is something else entirely. They will need to win a lot more than the Gulf War to achieve that. The problem with declaring the birth of a new world order is that it immediately raises the small matter of what is to become of the old one. Every international arrangement, in the third world and the West, is called into question. This process is certain to create further conflicts and chaos.

Take the issue of peace and stability in the Middle East. Crushing Iraq gave the USA more influence over the region than ever before. President George Bush has announced his plans for a bright new Middle East, to include security and stability in the Gulf and the settlement of the Palestinian question. But by challenging the old order, America's military invasion and power diplomacy have unleashed forces which could fragment the whole region in the way that Lebanon has already been pulled apart.

The modern Middle East is a hybrid creation of Western imperialism. Most states in the region have no natural or national reason to exist. They were imposed by the

British and the French in the early decades of the century, their borders just lines which the Western powers drew in the sand. This has made the Middle East one of the most volatile places on Earth, especially since Israel was created as a colonial settler state on Palestinian soil. Now America's bid to reshape the region under its control has begun to bring submerged divisions and rivalries to the surface. Thus the defeat of Saddam was followed by the rebellion of both Shiite Muslims and Kurds inside Iraq, which in turn encouraged protests in Shiite Iran and demands for self-determination for Kurds oppressed by Turkey. Meanwhile the impact of the war was bringing Jordan and Yemen close to collapse. Far from enjoying peace and stability, the Middle East region is in danger of descending into further mayhem as the old arrangements unravel.

● The continuing oppression of the Palestinian nation demonstrates that the USA has no interest in bringing peace with justice to the Middle East. Genuine Palestinian self-determination would involve the destruction of the state of Israel and of the illegitimate Arab regimes in the region. This is not exactly the new Middle East which Bush has in mind.

Instead of resolving the Palestinian question, America wants to redefine it out of existence, perhaps limiting the Palestinians to some empty 'autonomy' in the Israeli-occupied territories. Bush's proposal for an Arab-Israeli deal would mean the reactionary Arab regimes assuming more responsibility for policing the Palestinians. Any Palestinian 'homeland' supervised by the sheikhs in the shadow of the Israeli state would be about as free as the black homelands set up in South Africa under apartheid.

The USA may enjoy some success in its latest round of Middle Eastern diplomacy. But whatever deals are done on paper, even if they have the blessing of the PLO leadership, there can be no lasting peace or stability in the region while the Palestinians are denied complete self-determination. Even as Bush gave his hollow promises to end their plight, the Palestinians were coming under the cosh on both sides of the Middle East: in Kuwait, US troops stood by while Kuwaitis launched a pogrom against Palestinians who had opposed the Western invasion, and in the Israeli-occupied territories, a new cycle of violence began.

The most the Americans can achieve in the post-war Middle East is some sort of managed chaos. The accelerating trends towards 'Lebanonisation' look set to continue. This is a matter of indifference to the USA. But the consequences for the peoples of the region are already dire. And

things are set to get worse. Despite Washington's promise of peace and assurances that it will withdraw its Gulf forces, US and Western militarism is likely to play an ever larger part in the future of the Middle East.

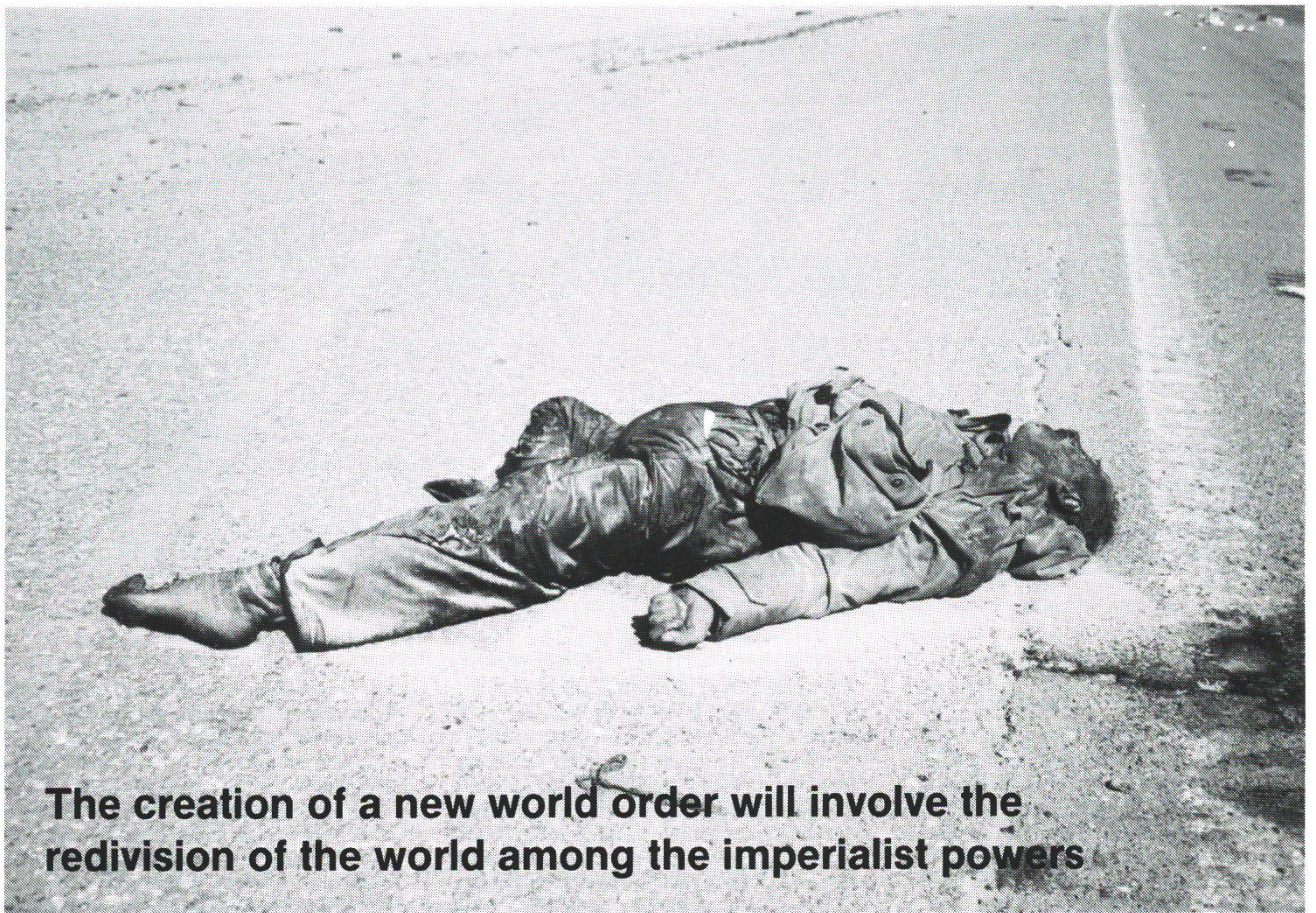
Elsewhere in the third world, the fear which the USA has created through its military victory against Iraq should not be confused with the consolidation of any stable pro-American order. The crushing of Iraq, and the US triumphalism which followed it, have sown deep resentment among others in the third world who see that they too are vulnerable to such an attack. There was never any prospect of an immediate Muslim uprising in support of Iraq. But the Gulf War has increased the underlying antagonism towards the USA and the West—and not just among Muslims, either. Days after the fighting ended, even Catholic bishops from the Orient felt obliged to interrupt an assembly in Rome to condemn the US-led Gulf invasion as an unjust war against the Arab world.

The deepening antagonism between the imperialist nations and much of the third world will put additional pressure on the USA to militarise its foreign policy along Gulf lines. Arch-reactionary Peregrine Worsthorne of the *Sunday Telegraph* has already recognised this, calling on the US and British governments to kill the myth that the United Nations led the Gulf War, because it might hinder the ability of Washington and Whitehall to take bilateral military action against the third world in the future.

● The major reason why America has many more battles to fight before it can claim to have forged a new world order concerns its relations with the other Western powers. In the old world order, they knew their place as junior partners of the USA in the anti-Soviet alliance. Now that the unifying pressures of the Cold War have been removed, the Western allies are less certain of where they fit in and are feeling their way towards new roles. Whether the Bonn or Tokyo vision of the new world matches that painted in Washington is very doubtful indeed.

For the moment, the tensions among the Western powers have been overshadowed by the dramatic military success against Iraq. The USA has pulled off its attempt to use the Gulf crisis to re-establish its clear position as top dog. Britain too, as America's loyalist ally, has been able to use its role in the Gulf to strengthen its hand in Europe. The USA is likely to be able to exploit its success in the Gulf War for some time, pressing the other big economies to continue financing it during the recession. Such international economic cooperation, and the added bonus of oil-





## The creation of a new world order will involve the redivision of the world among the imperialist powers

wealth hand-outs from the Gulf regimes, could help to soften (but not to stop) the impact of the slump in the USA.

The American establishment is well aware that events in the Gulf represent a victory over its reluctant allies as much as its enemies. Thus a post-war survey of winners and losers in the influential *International Business Week* put both Germany's chancellor Helmut Kohl and Japan's premier Toshiki Kaifu in the latter category. But things will not remain so clear-cut for long. America's bid to put itself at the head of a new world order has set in motion a powerful chain of events, forcing each of the Western powers to reconsider their own role in international affairs. Sooner or later the most dynamic capitalist nations, Japan and Germany, will conclude that they need to assume a more assertive political role which better matches their economic standing in the world.

The beginnings of this process were already in evidence during the Gulf crisis. The German and Japanese governments each combined their evident reluctance to fund the US-British war effort with muttering about the need to rewrite their post-war constitutions, which prevent them from playing a global military role of their own. Since the war ended, even as the Americans

crow about their achievements, the German and Japanese discussions about asserting themselves have gathered pace. The general secretary of Germany's ruling Christian Democrats has said that the country can no longer rely on its financial strength alone, but must be 'ready to undertake international responsibility'. The opposition Social Democrats, traditionally considered anti-militarist, have also suggested that Germany should play a central role in future United Nations-backed military operations—and in the UN security council.

The reluctance of the Japanese and Germans to become too involved in the Gulf War was widely interpreted as a sign of a deep-seated pacifism and anti-militarism in these societies. That is a dangerous misinterpretation. Those governments have been wary of involvement in the Gulf adventure because, at the present moment, the drive to recolonise parts of the third world is designed to bolster *America's* global influence. Little wonder, then, that the Germans and Japanese are not falling over themselves in their rush to foot the bill. The time is coming, however, when they will be faced with the need to take similar initiatives themselves, to put down a marker for their own stake in a new world order. Today's

alleged peacemongers among the imperialist powers will tomorrow join the ranks of the militarists.

The new world order which the USA is seeking cannot simply be declared after one victory in the desert. It requires a lasting settlement to all the disputes which dominate international relations today—between the third world and the West and, crucially, among the Western nations themselves. In short, it will involve the redivision of the world among the imperialist powers. Such a readjustment has never been made without major upheavals and conflicts.

America's drive towards recolonisation represents the first step towards the redivision of the world. The initial victims are the peoples of Iraq and the third world. But none of us can escape the consequences. The new age of aggressive imperialism in regions like the Middle East will strengthen the culture of militarism everywhere, giving encouragement to reactionaries across the West—and nowhere more so than in bellicose Britain. They have made a good start through the Gulf War. Those who want to put an end to imperialism have some catching up to do, if we are to be ready for them the next time the sirens of war start to wail.



# Letters

**We welcome readers' views and criticisms.**

Please keep your letters as short as possible and send them to The Editor, *Living Marxism*, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX, or fax them on (071) 377 0346

## Eye-witness in Kuwait

I am writing to describe the aftermath of the US and British massacre of Iraqi troops fleeing Kuwait along the Basra road, which I travelled to after the bombing had stopped.

In the area around what is known as the first border, on the outskirts of Kuwait City, I saw about 1200 vehicles—tanks, trucks, buses, cars, motorbikes, every conceivable form of vehicle, ambulances included. On the Monday and Tuesday nights [25/26 February], everyone had tried to escape from Kuwait City and all six lanes of the motorway were jammed. They were bombed from the air by A-10 bombers. Very few people could have escaped. Those who tried to run away would have been fired at and shot—this was told to me by an American marine.

The worst of the carnage was up to the bottleneck a few kilometres outside Kuwait City. But there were burnt-out and bombed vehicles stretched all along the road to Basra and beyond. There were bodies all along the road. It was a massacre which lasted a couple of days. Some vehicles still had their engines running. Some people had not died instantly. They were alive for a while after the bombing, but no attempt was made to rescue them. You couldn't even estimate how many had been killed.

The whole road is a massacre—a massacre of people trying to escape. They were attacked from the air and from the ground. They were shot at by American and British tanks. The US and British forces were targeting different sections of the road. It looked like a traffic jam, everything stopped and still. The vehicles were higgledy-piggledy as some drivers tried to get off the road into the sand. All the cars and lorries were loaded with cheap goods—crap, really, that they were going to sell. The people that were in the cars were burnt to death. It looked like everything had been frozen.

US and British troops have been making their way along the road burying corpses in shallow graves along the way. But many of those killed will never be buried. They used those vacuum-pack rocket bombs which make a small hole in the side of the tank, then it takes out all their oxygen. Everything inside is burnt to a crisp. 'You're lucky if you find one bone', said an American soldier. There's no evidence of their existence but you could smell what had happened.

Western troops have renamed this massacre the 'mother of all easy target areas'. They also referred to it as 'the turkey shoot'. But some of the soldiers were taken aback by it. Everyone who saw the results was shocked.

Some people say women and children were killed in the bombing as well as fleeing Iraqi troops. I didn't see the corpses of any women or children, but I did see small sandals and flip-flops which didn't look like military footwear. They could have been taken from Kuwait City by Iraqi soldiers or perhaps they were worn by Palestinians escaping.

Palestinians in the city are now in a dreadful state. Food is being distributed via official channels and they are not receiving any. Sudanese are also being persecuted. Palestinians are checked and double-checked at roadblocks. The city is full of young Kuwaitis with guns. And the Americans know that the Palestinians are being persecuted.

**Stephen Clark (pseudonym)** TV crew member, Kuwait City

## Taking sides on the Gulf

After several months of strong reasoning over the Gulf crisis, Pat Roberts' article ('Anti-war? Not good enough!', February) was wrong on a number of counts. Most obviously, there is no

evidence to suggest that 'refusing to take sides in practice means acquiescing to the domination of the weaker by the stronger'. And how could support for so-called Arab nationalism not be seen as support for Saddam Hussein?

The reduction of the conflict to Western imperialism vs Arab nationalism is something few could deny. But Iraq invaded Kuwait, not in the interests of Arab unity or self-determination (which could never be achieved by militaristic coercion), but for the oilfields and sea trading routes. Saddam's treatment of the Palestinians, Kurds, Kuwaitis and even his own people is evidence enough to dismiss such claims. He knew, of course, that his aggression would strike a blow at Western interests in the region, and used this as a pretext to rally support from Arab neighbours. The only unity Saddam Hussein wants is unity under complete Iraqi domination. The calls to Arab nationalism merely disguise an overt fascist takeover.

The invasion of Kuwait was simply an act of capitalist gain for the Iraqi ruling class. If we must reduce the conflict to A vs B, then it is big Western capitalism vs little Iraqi capitalism, so neither side is worth working class support. I agree that socialists should not sit on the fence but neither should they take sides. Rather, they should work to bring down their own capitalist regimes as the only means to solve the world's problems.

**MJ Britnell** Leicester

In the article, 'Anti-war? Not good enough!' (February), Pat Roberts puts the case for support for Arab nationalism. This is all well and good. However, the Middle East is not made up solely of Arabs; the region is also home to Kurds and Persians, etc. There is a danger that in supporting only Arab self-determination, other peoples of the region will



be denied their rights. All people in the Middle East must be allowed self-determination.

The whole region is the creation of Western imperialism. But 'countries' like Iraq still contain an indigenous bourgeoisie. We can't attempt to bring down our own ruling classes at home and at the same time defend the bourgeoisie in Iraq (or any other country) just because they are in combat with Western imperialism. We should support all the peoples of the region in their struggle against their own ruling classes as well as Western imperialism.

**Giorgio DeSantis** Hounslow

## Anti-Semitism in the East

Mark Dalewicz (letters, March) argued that the current wave of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe has nothing to do with the revival of market forces, but has been caused by anti-Semitic campaigns of the Kremlin over the last 45 years.

But why begin only 45 years ago, Mark? Anti-Semitic pogroms began at least 100 years ago in Eastern Europe. In fact, the article he criticises ('An A-Z of the triumph of capitalism', February) talked about a 'comeback' of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Those pogroms at the beginning of the century were directed by nationalist, pro-capitalist forces against their Jewish rivals. It is worth remembering that it was a more advanced Western capitalist country that produced the most virulently anti-Semitic society of all: Nazi Germany.

Dalewicz is correct to point out that anti-Semitism existed in Stalinist Eastern Europe, but careful investigation will reveal that it remained a distinct phenomenon most closely associated with the intelligentsia—who viewed Jews as direct competitors for jobs in the bureaucracy. Both Russians and Poles can claim to have been more ruthlessly persecuted than the Jews by the Stalinist regimes of their own countries.

This is indeed the source of modern anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. There are very few Jews left in Eastern Europe today. But nationalists claim that the bureaucracy protected Jews in the past and is manipulated by them now. Anti-Semitism has become the code word for anti-communism—just as in Japan (where there are also few Jews) it is the right's codeword for anti-Americanism. Contrary to Dalewicz's claims, Marxists would gain no mileage from fostering anti-Semitism, which is divisive and can only aid reactionaries East and West. And while it is nice to see a member of the Tory Party of that notorious anti-Semite Winston Churchill come to the defence of Trotsky, there is no evidence that Lenin ever expressed anti-Semitic sentiments.

**Andy Clarkson** London

## Israel and imperialism

Daniel Nassim ('Israel: still the chosen one?', March) argues that Israel has become a liability to America because it has created enormous

resentment against the West in the Arab world, and that direct Western intervention has made Israel's previous functions redundant. But isn't this a rather one-sided and superficial assessment? It may accord with some temporary configurations, but how likely are they to exist still in one year's time?

Other forces exert themselves on the Arab regimes besides imperialism, such as the radicalised masses. Israel remains an important agent of the West because it is the most 'staunchly reliable ally of imperialism', as he put it. As soon as the anti-Iraq coalition crumbles, Washington will need every friend it can get in the Middle East. Then Israel will re-emerge from its sin bin to rejoin the front ranks of the Western barbarians.

**Debbie Sanderson** Hackney

## Not-so-Red Clydeside

Jill Gordon's search for 'useful pointers for the peace movement today' in the struggle against conscription in the First World War ('War against war', March), must have been written while she was wearing rose-tinted glasses. On Clydeside, conscription was opposed on trade union grounds and expressed no opposition to the war. Skilled men were protected from the draft if they worked in munitions, which drove another wedge between skilled and unskilled workers, summed up in the popular rhyme of the time:

'Don't sent me to the army George,  
I'm in the ASE,  
Take all the labourers,  
But for God's sake don't take me.'

Opposition to the war never became a priority for the Clyde Workers Committee (CWC). Its priority was industrial organisation, and its leaders feared that the discussion of the war would provoke disunity. In 1915, John MacLean, who supported a general strike against the war, was banned from the CWC.

When the government decided to distribute medals to the 'heroes' in the factories, workers in the torpedo factory outside Greenock unanimously awarded its medal to its lavatory attendant. But there was no serious opposition to the war. Workers continued to grind out the munitions without which the slaughter could not have continued. The history of Red Clydeside shows that the opportunities for change were squandered because of a lack of revolutionary politics. That is the 'useful pointer' for today.

**Carol Taggart** Glasgow

## Erudite and highly specialised

James Heartfield's recent review of radical social theory ('Vive la difference (sic)?', March), constitutes a worrying development. Heartfield argues that the work of the widely varied

authors he discusses all have the same implicit logic. But to suggest that Kate Soper and Jacques Derrida agree on anything at all (especially politics) is, frankly, nonsense. Derrida has spent his entire career making things difficult for the Sopers of this world which is why people are deeply antagonistic towards his work.

Derrida's critique of *logocentrism* is an erudite and highly specialised affair which is concerned with rethinking fundamental concepts. This is what Heartfield describes as 'relativism', oblivious of the fact that this is a charge Derrida has consistently and repeatedly rejected. Heartfield is likewise unaware of the critical distance Derrida has put between himself and Heidegger in his recent book *Of Spirit*. Perhaps Heartfield chooses to ignore or avoid these rather awkward facts because they would complicate his simplistic assertion that Derrida built on the tradition of 'German irrationalism' (an ill-defined creature if ever there was one).

No doubt the fact that Derrida has consistently *not* associated himself with the Sopers of this world is too much for Heartfield to handle. He seems to think that anyone who eschews direct political involvement, but is influential on the left, must automatically be a supporter of saving the whale. I hope the task of developing Marxism's revolutionary critical faculty is restored to centre-stage in any future attempt at engagement with modern social theory. The necessity of extending and deepening debate cannot coexist with Heartfield's indulgent defence of traditional certainties.

**Gary Banham** Oxford

## Style wars (cont)

I would like to echo with the strongest feeling Sam Bagnall's terse and penetrating comments on the image presented by *Living Marxism's* contributors (letters, March). It is reassuring to hear the voice, at last, of someone who bypasses the more irrelevant everyday issues of just what kind of cesspit this uniquely fecund orb is heading for, and concentrates instead on the crucial matters of style and identity with which we are confronted today. Thanks for keeping the issue alive, Sam! Can I also suggest that the *Living Marxism* team photos be enlarged to A6 size at least, and please let's have John Pilger in profile. Has no one told him that he'd go down much better on the *Media Show* with a good old British short back and sides?

**John Clamp** Bristol

I only buy *Living Marxism* because of Ann Bradley's haircut.

**Joe Barnett** London

**Haired enough? So have we. This correspondence is now closed**



# Atrocities and acts of war

Kenan Malik reviews the selective media coverage of the carnage in the Gulf

**A**s US troops and their allies recaptured Kuwait City, journalists discovered 41 bodies in the morgue of the Mubarak hospital. Many bore evidence of terrible mutilation, some with eyes gouged out, others burnt virtually beyond recognition. A few miles away stood another morgue on a rather larger scale. Hundreds of vehicles littered the road from Kuwait City to the Iraqi port of Basra, most reduced to burnt-out heaps of tangled metal. Thousands of charred and mutilated bodies covered the roadside. The two scenes were testament to the horrors of the Gulf War. They were also testament to the selective approach to the reporting of those horrors adopted by British and Western journalists.

### 'Monument to victory'

It was impossible to verify the truth about the bodies in the Kuwait City morgue. They may well have been the victims of Iraqi torture. They may have died in the bitter fighting to capture Kuwait City. They may even have been Iraqis or Palestinians who had fallen into Kuwaiti hands. There could be no doubt, however, about what caused the slaughter on the Basra road. It was the result of a murderous Western assault on Iraqi troops who were fleeing for their lives.

As Iraqis had fled north in a raggle-taggle convoy of fire-engines, Mercedes limousines, police cars and dumper trucks, Western and allied forces had blasted them with cluster bombs, rockets, artillery and tanks. According to the Western press, however, the 41 bodies in Kuwait provided definite evidence of mass Iraqi atrocities. The thousands that lay strewn across the road to Basra, on the other hand, were just the unfortunate victims of an 'act of war'.



The 'tortured' British airmen turned out to have been injured when their aircraft crashed



If the USA  
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Some reports even went further, glorifying the massacre of Iraqis; surveying the scene on the Basra road, the *Sunday Times* declared that 'the monument to this victory is awesome'.

Throughout the Gulf crisis Western journalists accepted rumours, half-truths and lies as positive evidence of the barbarism of Iraqi forces. Clear evidence of Western atrocities on the other hand was ignored or dismissed as the inevitable consequence of war.

Western journalists started filing stories of Iraqi atrocities almost as soon as Saddam Hussein's tanks had rolled into Kuwait. It began with lurid tales of the ill-treatment of Western detainees and of Iraqi soldiers abusing and raping Western air hostesses. Soon there were reports that thousands of Kuwaitis had been abducted, imprisoned, raped, tortured and killed. In an emotional speech in November US president George Bush claimed that Iraqi soldiers had torn babies from incubators in Kuwaiti hospitals and left them to die on the floor. This sensational claim was given authoritative backing in a report from Amnesty International.

After Western forces entered Kuwait City in February the horror stories multiplied. The *Times* claimed that Iraqi troops had drained Kuwaitis of their blood and left the corpses to rot on the streets. The *Observer* reported that hundreds of babies had been butchered and buried in mass graves. The *Guardian's* Matthew Engel listed a long litany of Iraqi horrors. He admitted that most of these stories 'in other circumstances would seem absurd but here seemed all-too believable'. Engel concluded that 'the Iraqi occupation must constitute a reign of terror to match any in the annals of history'.

The stories were 'all-too believable' because most British and other Western journalists were all-too desperate to believe them, to give substance to their governments' argument that this was 'a just war'. The more unbelievable the horrors, the better they could be used to demonise the Iraqis and portray them as a people without a shred of civilised values who deserved the slaughter inflicted upon them by the Western forces.

In fact most of the best-publicised claims were refuted almost as soon as they were made. The British air hostess supposedly abducted and raped by Iraqi soldiers in the first days of the invasion turned up a few days later denying the story. Officials at Kuwait's hospitals dismissed as absurd the stories of babies being

snatched from incubators; there were not even enough incubators to hold the number of babies which Western reports claimed had been taken.

Throughout the war the Western press claimed that the ice rink in Kuwait City had been turned into a mass morgue to hold all the victims of Iraqi atrocities. Not a single body was discovered in the building, nor any evidence there ever had been any. The story that the Iraqis abducted up to 40 000 Kuwaitis and were holding them hostage in Iraq simply disappeared from the news.

Not that the lack of facts seemed to bother British journalists. 'Some of the old stories were proved incorrect', admitted the *Observer*, but added that this was 'almost irrelevant'. The newspaper had discovered 'new stories...of young men being stuffed into sewers and set alight and of sun-burned bodies hanging from telegraph poles'. Never mind if your unsubstantiated rumours get discredited, there will be another one along in a minute.

### No contest

There is no such thing as a clean war, and it is certain that the Iraqis did not behave like dinner party guests while in Kuwait. But two things are clear. First, that Western journalists have fabricated stories of Iraqi barbarity (or printed other people's fabrications as fact). Second, and most importantly, even if every claim that the Western media made about Iraqi atrocities were true, they still wouldn't come close to matching the war crimes which the US, British and other forces committed against Iraq.

The Western war in the Gulf amounted to one of the most concentrated campaigns of deliberate slaughter in military history. 'By the time the Iraqis are forced out of Kuwait', General Thomas Kelly, chief of operations at the Pentagon, told the press a week before the start of the ground war, 'there won't be many of them left'. An Iraqi army of raw conscripts, many of them teenagers fresh from the fields, faced the deadliest killing machine ever assembled. Conservative estimates put the number of Iraqi military dead at 200 000. That amounts to nearly half the Iraqi force in Kuwait and one per cent of the total population of Iraq; if the USA lost the same proportion of its population, there would be around 2.5m dead.

The Western media ignored this slaughter, reporting the aerial photographs of Western bombing raids without mentioning the carnage they were causing on the ground. While television and the press eulogised the 147 coalition soldiers

killed in action, the Iraqi dead were just shovelled by mechanical diggers into mass graves to rot by the tens of thousands in the killing fields of southern Iraq and Kuwait.

Iraqi forces were subject to the most unimaginable horrors in a deliberate campaign of genocide carefully planned in the Pentagon. The lucky ones were carpet-bombed by B-52s. Others faced the terror of napalm bombs. Most gruesome of all was the Americans' use of 'fuel-air explosive' devices which fill the atmosphere with combustible gas, and then ignite it. The bombs create a huge fireball, equivalent in force to a tactical nuclear device. The effect of the fireball is to suck all oxygen out of the atmosphere leading to an agonising death as your lungs collapse.

If most Western journalists turned their backs on the slaughter on the battlefields, they were equally selective in their coverage of atrocities against civilians. After the recapture of Kuwait City, the media made much of the power stations and civilian buildings in the town which had been destroyed. It is still unclear whether the destruction was the result of Iraqi sabotage or American bombing. What is clear is that far greater atrocities were committed by the West against civilians in Iraq—and that the press passed them over in silence.

Baghdad, a city of four million people, had been left without electricity since the first day of the war, when US bombers reduced the city's power plants to rubble. There had been no water supply since bombers destroyed the pumping plants. Sewage ran in the streets. Baghdad citizens were forced to collect drinking water from the Tigris river, yards from where raw sewage now flooded into the river. The World Health Organisation warned of epidemics of typhoid, cholera, hepatitis and polio. Diarrhoea infections among children have increased fourfold since the war began because of the lack of clean drinking water.

American and British bombing raids left hospitals without heat for wards, refrigeration for drugs or electricity to run laboratories. Doctors often had to work in the dark, without sterile equipment and often without anaesthetic. Since the start of the war there have been no operating incubators in Baghdad. But no Western journalist has thought fit to relay the (true) story of how Iraqi babies lay dying in cold beds because the West had pulled the plugs on their incubators.



# The cruellest hoax

America sold its war as a crusade to liberate a small country from Iraqi occupation. Kirsten Cale points to evidence which suggests that Kuwait was never the real issue for the USA

In April 1990, George Bush sent Saddam Hussein and the people of Iraq special greetings to mark the end of Ramadan. Bush said he hoped the Iraqi people would continue to 'enjoy the blessings of peace' and that US-Iraqi ties would contribute to 'stability and peace in the Middle East'. A year later Iraq lies devastated, crushed by the American military in the name of that same 'stability and peace'.

From the start, Washington claimed that its only concern in the Gulf was to free Kuwait from Iraqi control. But as the Gulf crisis

unfolded, plenty of evidence came to light suggesting that Kuwait was only ever a sideshow to the global power-play set in motion by the USA last year. As *Living Marxism* has consistently argued, freedom for Kuwait was never that important to the White House. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait simply served as a *pretext* for a massive display of America's military power, designed to demonstrate to both the third world and the rest of the West that the USA is still Number One.

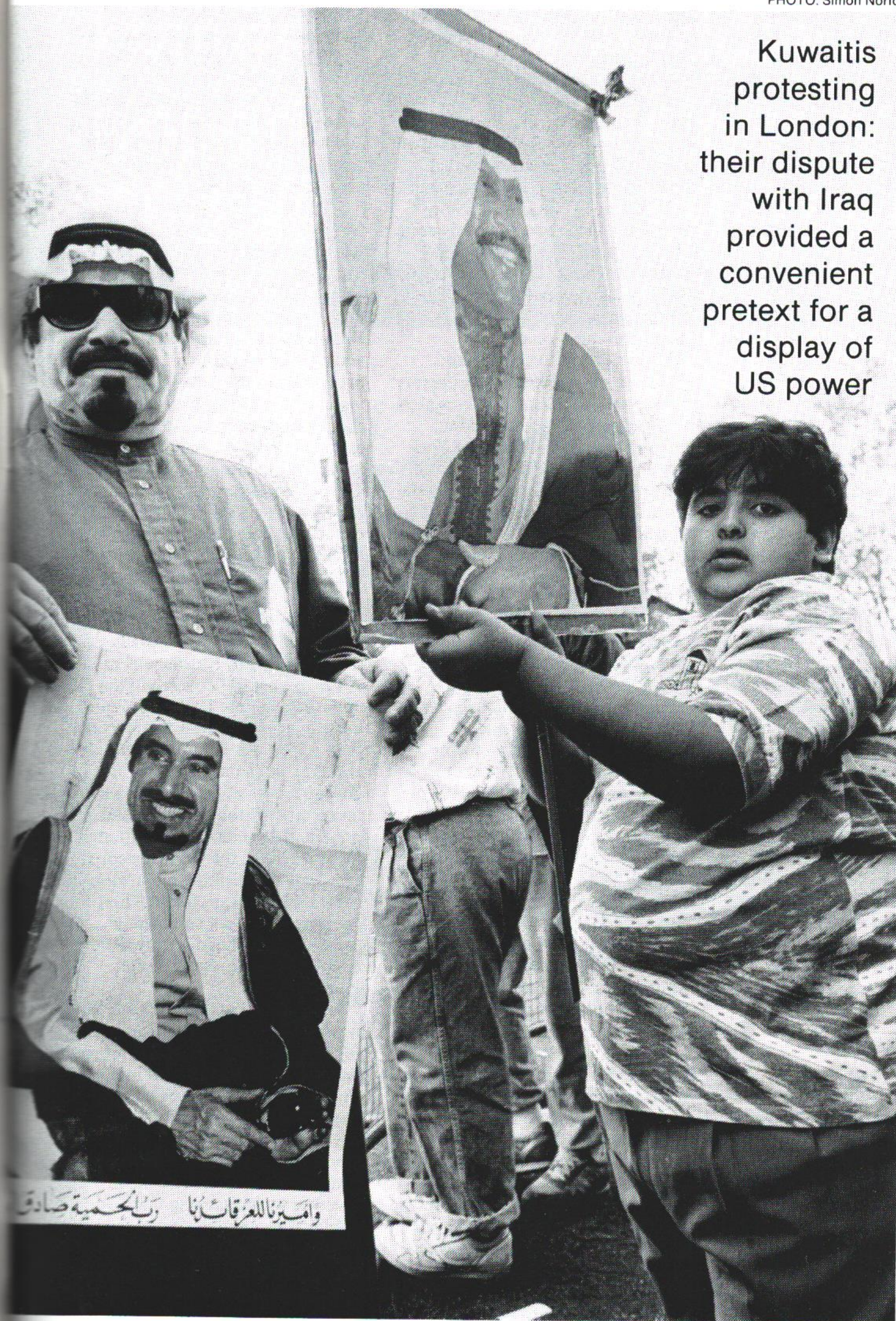
Today the USA would like us to believe that it has always been the

defender of poor little Kuwait against evil Iraq. Before the Gulf crisis began, however, America was sending Saddam Hussein friendly Ramadan messages and military intelligence. What's more, the USA had even *encouraged* Saddam to put the squeeze on Kuwait, to secure higher oil prices and access to disputed oilfields. Kuwaiti sovereignty—the rallying cry of America's Gulf War—never entered the equation.

In February 1990, the Washington Centre for Strategic and International Studies advised



**Kuwaitis protesting in London: their dispute with Iraq provided a convenient pretext for a display of US power**



As relations between Iraq and Kuwait deteriorated during July, America continued to show no concern over any threat to Kuwaiti sovereignty. By the end of the month, rumours of an imminent Iraqi invasion were rife in the Gulf region. On 25 July 1990 Washington responded by sending its ambassador in Baghdad, April Glaspie, to reassure Saddam that America would not interfere. 'We don't have an opinion on...your dispute with Kuwait', Glaspie told the Iraqi ruler several times, adding that US secretary of state James Baker had 'directed our official spokesman to reiterate this stand'. The following week, as Iraqi tanks warmed up on the Kuwaiti border, both Bush's aide Margaret Tutweiler and assistant secretary of state John Kelly stated publicly and repeatedly that the USA felt no obligation to come to Kuwait's defence if it was attacked.

So in the run-up to Saddam's invasion, the American foreign policy establishment was not seriously concerned about Kuwait. It was, however, deeply disturbed by the implications of the end of the Cold War. The disappearance of the mythical 'red menace' had removed the major justification for US militarism in general, and for the US-led Western alliance in particular. Washington needed a replacement for the Cold War. Throughout 1990, the US administration sought to portray third world nationalism as the new threat to the Western world, against which its allies should unite behind the American military umbrella. The most important and unstable of third world regions, the Middle East, became the focus for much of America's revised military planning. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait provided the excuse for the USA to execute those plans and demonstrate its power against a hyped-up threat from a third world regime.

**'Optimum contenders'**

In April 1990, General Colin Powell overhauled US contingency plans for a Middle East crisis, scrapping battle plans based on a potential Soviet threat to Iran, and prioritising plans for the defence of the Saudi oilfields from regional threats. The following month, the US national security council produced a white paper which cited Iraq and Saddam Hussein as 'the optimum contenders to replace the Warsaw Pact' as the justification for major military expenditures.

In July, even as US spokesmen were announcing that they had no interest in Kuwait, General Norman Schwarzkopf ran staff exercises based on an Iraqi invasion of

Saddam to adopt a more aggressive stance in Opec, and demand lower oil output and higher prices to offset Iraq's economic problems. The Americans suggested a target price of \$25 a barrel, even though they knew that this proposal was bound to increase tensions with Kuwait, a low-cost, high-quota oil producer. The Iraqis took the American advice, and when Iraqi minister Saadoun

Hammadi demanded higher prices in July, he proposed \$25 a barrel. Sure enough, the Kuwaitis protested, precipitating rows over oil quotas and prices which culminated in the Iraqi invasion. In a meeting with the US *chargé d'affaires* Joseph Wilson on 5 August 1990, days after the invasion, Saddam told the Americans 'You did this. *We accepted \$25 per barrel*'.



Kuwait, and another based on the American deployment of air power and 100 000 troops into Saudi Arabia. One officer later commented that the similarities between the exercises and what was really to happen were 'eerie': 'When the real came, the only way they could tell the real intelligence and the practice intelligence was the little "t" in the corner of the paper—"t" for training.'

### Good excuse

When Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990, America seized upon the opportunity to reassert its role as world policeman. Overnight, the Bush administration transformed Kuwaiti sovereignty from an issue on which it had 'no opinion' to 'the greatest moral issue since the Second World War'. Washington then set about militarising and globalising the Gulf crisis. In these cynical foreign policy calculations, Kuwait itself was of interest to the Americans only in so far as the Gulf provided a good focus around which to reinvigorate the Western Alliance. Western sensitivities about the strategic and economic importance of the Middle East meant that it was much easier to pull the other capitalist powers behind an American crusade centred on Kuwait than one aimed at a less wealthy and well-placed country in the third world.

Throughout the Gulf crisis it became ever clearer that America's war aims went far beyond Kuwait. The USA raised the stakes at every stage of the conflict, determined to maintain the initiative and to stamp its authority on international affairs. Each time somebody mentioned peace, the Americans pushed on harder with their policy of war.

### A different game

The clichés about Iraqi 'intransigence' ignore Baghdad's numerous attempts to make concessions and reach a compromise with the USA. Saddam obviously expected to be able to stitch together a deal with US imperialism, just as plenty of rogue third world dictators had done in the past. But America was operating to a different game-plan this time. It wanted outright military victory to increase its political authority in the West and the third world. Negotiation and compromise were off the US agenda—especially when they were proposed by another power, be it France or the Soviet Union.

Only eight days after the invasion of Kuwait, the Iraqi government transmitted a message to the White House that, 'Iraq would return military action in kind', but that it would not attack Saudi Arabia, and

that it was prepared to 'increase good relations with the US, including oil, [and] keep all options open'. American officials ignored the offer.

A fortnight later, on 23 August 1990, Brent Scowcroft, Bush's national security adviser, received an offer from Baghdad to withdraw from Kuwait and allow foreigners to leave, if United Nations sanctions were lifted and Iraq was given access to the Gulf and control over the Rumailah oilfield. Unlike Baghdad's public pronouncements, this private offer made no mention of the Palestinian question or US withdrawal from the Gulf, and offered an oil agreement 'satisfactory to both nations' security interests'. A Washington official, responding through an article in the *New York Times*, said that the Iraqi proposal 'had not been taken seriously' by the administration, 'because Bush demands the unconditional withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait'.

### 'No ceasefire'

As the United Nations deadline drew closer, the Iraqis made another attempt to reopen negotiations with the USA. On 10 January 1991, Saddam met the UN chief, Javier Perez de Cuellar, in Baghdad. Saddam indicated that, while he could not use the word 'withdrawal' because of domestic political pressures, he was prepared to countenance a deal which would amount to the same thing: the Iraqi people were 'ready to sacrifice for the cause of peace' if the USA and its allies would do the same. Saddam twice asked the UN envoy to use his influence to promote a new round of negotiations. Perez de Cuellar returned to the UN claiming that the peace initiative had failed.

And just a day before the UN deadline, French president François Mitterrand proposed a security council resolution which called for Iraq's phased withdrawal from Kuwait. Britain and the USA scuttled the initiative. One of Mitterrand's aides complained: 'We had no choice but to withdraw. The US behaved with unbelievable brutality towards our ambassador.' While the wheels of diplomacy were still turning, the USA launched the massive air war against targets in Iraq and Kuwait.

Once the shooting war began, the USA showed a similar reluctance to end it by doing a deal to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Every time the Iraqis sought diplomatic compromise involving a withdrawal, the Americans, backed by Britain, would repolarise the conflict by raising the military stakes higher still.

On 15 February 1991, for example, Iraq offered to withdraw from

Kuwait. President Bush rejected Saddam's offer as a 'cruel hoax' and raised the temperature by calling on the Iraqi military to overthrow Saddam. Later, during a walkabout in a Patriot missile factory, Bush laid down the line: 'There will not be a cessation of hostilities. There will be no pause. No ceasefire.'

Three days later, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev presented Saddam's foreign minister Tariq Aziz with a peace plan which demanded a quick Iraqi withdrawal. The Iraqis accepted the plan, but America and Britain rejected it as 'well short of what would be required'. Gorbachev produced a second deal which included a string of humiliating sub-clauses demanded by America. Aziz accepted the plan. America stepped up bombing raids against Baghdad. Then Washington cut the diplomacy dead by raising the military stakes once more, launching the huge land offensive which only ended with the Iraqis fleeing Kuwait on 28 February 1991, leaving behind tens of thousands of their dead.

All the evidence demonstrates that the local issue of Kuwait was never America's central concern in the Gulf crisis. Indeed, the USA is probably more concerned about Kuwait now than it ever was before. Washington is calling in its markers, and part of Kuwait's pay-off to America will be fat reconstruction contracts and preferential oil deals. Straight after the war ended, the US army corps of engineers scooped the plum 'clean-up' contract in Kuwait, and the first contract given to a commercial company (to rebuild a runway) went to Raytheon, producer of the Patriot missile.

Understanding that the Gulf War was not caused by American concern for Kuwaiti independence is more than a matter of historical interest. The Gulf crisis has revealed the central dynamic in post-Cold War US foreign policy. This is the drive to demonstrate American leadership and hold the Western Alliance together by militarising international affairs at every opportunity, even if it means turning little local disputes into major global crises. Unless opponents of imperialism recognise this momentum in US foreign policy, we will be taken by surprise when Washington finds another Kuwait to justify its aggression in the third world. The militaristic drift of American foreign policy has accelerated in motion in the Gulf. As the issue of Kuwait fades once more into the background, the question now is, where next?

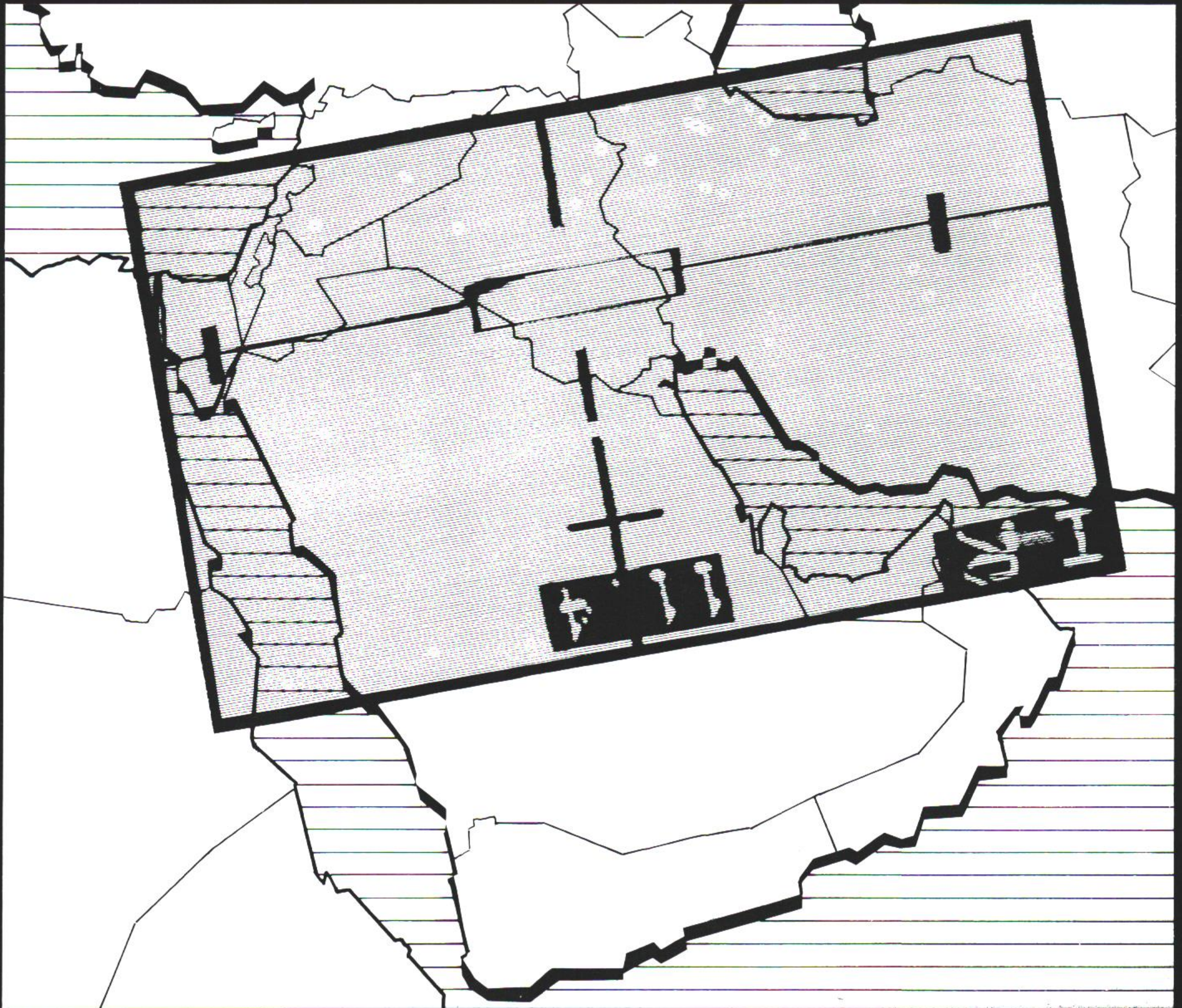
Aziz accepted the withdrawal plan. America stepped up bombing raids against Baghdad



# Hands Off the Middle East

## Imperialist forces out of the Gulf

### End all Western interference



The shooting war is over, but the New Age of Imperialism is only beginning. The Hands Off the Middle East Committee is continuing the campaign for peace with justice for the people of the Middle East, by opposing all Western intervention in the region. Join us.

**No sanctions!**

Phone (071) 375 2697 or write to the Hands Off the Middle East Committee, c/o BM WAR, London WC1N 3XX



# Who gave the Wes

**N**ow that the 'fog of war', otherwise known as military censorship, has lifted slightly it is clear that the mass slaughter of Iraqis by US, British and French bombing dwarfs the casualties caused by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The Western powers have proved themselves by far the greatest force for violence in the Middle East, leaving mass graves and mayhem in their wake.

Yet within days of the incineration of tens of thousands of fleeing Iraqi soldiers on the Basra road, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament ran an advert in the national press headed 'Who gave Iraq the means to kill?':

'Who helped build their war machine? Who trained them, sold them weapons, technology and the means for mass destruction?...Join CND today or send a donation and help us ensure it never happens again.' (*Guardian*, 4 March 1991)

It seems that CND's main concern is not with the war machine of the Western powers and its devastating impact on a third world country like Iraq, but the capacity of third world countries to defend themselves against it.

The CND publicity presents a grotesque inversion of the reality of a war in which the West did 99 per cent of the killing, proving that it had far more effective 'means to kill' than anything the Iraqi regime could come up with. This distorted approach is consistent with CND's attitude throughout the Gulf crisis, during which it ran the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf.

From the start CND blamed Iraq for the crisis. Its main demands were for Iraq to get out of Kuwait, and for the removal of Iraq's chemical and (non-existent) nuclear weaponry. These were the same war aims being put forward by the Western allies. CND thus became the left wing of a consensus which stretched across the British political spectrum. It accepted the establishment view that the main problem was Saddam Hussein. It accepted that Western intervention was necessary to deal with him. It thus gave moral authority to the US/British crusade to neuter Iraq.

CND's adverts ask 'Who gave Iraq the means to kill?'. Rob Knight puts a more pertinent question to the peace movement, whose major contribution to the Gulf crisis was to make things easy for the British warmongers

CND differed with the Western powers only over the means to be used in achieving their common aims. The peace movement's own alternative war plan called for economic sanctions to be continued longer, while Washington and Whitehall wanted to send in the B-52s to finish the job sooner. Thanks to CND the focus for public discussion became not the legitimacy or otherwise of Western intervention in the Gulf, but the form that intervention should take. Boiled down to essentials, the alternatives being put forward were either to bomb the Iraqis or to starve them.

## Into their hands

Having accepted that the West's war aims were legitimate, CND could not cope once the bombing of Iraq began. It opposed the use of force but because it accepted the Western allies' objectives its opposition could make little impact. After all, both CND and the Tory government were telling the British public that Saddam Hussein and his weapons really were the major threat to world peace. In which case, it seemed sensible to most people to hit him hard and fast rather than wait for sanctions to work. CND's arguments could appeal only to a core of committed pacifists who consider the use of force illegitimate in any circumstances. In a bid to broaden its appeal without offending patriotic sentiment, CND was reduced to focusing on the welfare of British soldiers, calling for them to be brought home alive. That was another argument which played into the hands of the militarists, who claimed to be conducting their savage air war against the Iraqis precisely to save the lives of British squaddies.

CND's anti-Iraqi stance, and its

sympathy with the aims if not the methods of Western imperialism, made it neither willing nor able to organise a mass movement against the war. It began to call small, local demonstrations instead of national ones. The numbers attending dwindled. Afraid of being seen as unpatriotic, CND then turned to witch-hunting those in the anti-war movement who opposed Western intervention and defended Iraq. As a result many people who initially objected to the war were left confused and isolated. The anti-war movement was left on the sidelines.

The British government was able to play a full role in the devastation of Iraq, confident that it faced little opposition at home. CND's acceptance that Western intervention in the Middle East was legitimate means that it cannot escape responsibility for what happened to Iraq. Of course CND supporters will have been appalled by the slaughter. But their revulsion cannot alter the fact that their campaign helped give the Western militarists a free hand, by reducing the anti-war movement to a lobby proposing that the government adopt an alternative brand of imperialism.

The problem with CND's attitude throughout the Gulf crisis was its implication that the USA, Britain and the West could be a force for peace and justice in the Middle East. A cursory glance at the region's history indicates that the opposite is true.

Border disputes and conflicts like that between Kuwait and Iraq are a product of the way in which Western imperialism carved up the Middle East. In the years before and after the First World War the Western powers—primarily Britain and



# t the licence to kill?

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

The peace movement's major concern was to avoid appearing unpatriotic



France—created a system of artificial and easily manipulated states in the region. The border between Iraq and Kuwait was drawn by a representative of the British Empire, Sir Percy Cox, and has been a source of contention ever since. After the Second World War, the tensions which Western interference had instilled in the Middle East were greatly increased by the creation and expansion of the state of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Israel has acted as America's local gendarme, with heavy financial and military backing.

To secure their control over the peoples of the Middle East, the Western powers have continually fomented conflicts, coups and wars and backed repression in the region. Western powers helped both sides to keep fighting in the eight-year Iran/Iraq War, maintaining the stalemate which they wanted while a million died. For over 15 years Lebanon has been torn apart by a civil war in which different factions are armed and supported by outside powers. The West is the force behind

tyrants who rule states like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt. Having defeated its former ally Saddam Hussein in the military conflict, the USA is now trying to dictate how Iraq should be run in the future.

Many people in the Middle East understand that the West is the main problem. That is why Palestinians and others supported Saddam Hussein in the war. They were not expressing their admiration for his record as a dictator; they supported him because he seemed to be making a stand against the West. Those in the Arab and Islamic world who react against interference by the West do so not because they are sophisticated students of history, but because they experience the consequences of Western domination every day.

After hammering Iraq, the Western powers turned to talking about peace in the Gulf. But to them, peace means the consolidation of imperialist control. It means subduing Arab aspirations for self-determination, and perpetuating the system which brings poverty and

oppression to the Middle East. Based on the slaughter of thousands of Iraqis, their peace is the peace of the grave.

It was all very well for CND to ask the victorious Western powers to introduce a just peace or 'peace with dignity' at the end of the Gulf War. The fact is, however, that there can be no peace with justice in the Middle East and no dignity for the masses there while Western imperialism continues to interfere in and dictate the region's affairs.

To take an effective stand against the Gulf War required taking a stand against all Western intervention in the Middle East. This was the attitude of the Hands Off the Middle East Committee (Home). For Home a just peace in the Middle East means an end to all Western interference, be it economic, political or military. That was why, during the war, Home supporters raised the demand 'Victory to Iraq'. We had no illusions in Saddam Hussein, nor did we believe that Iraq could win. Our aim in siding with Iraq against the US-led invasion was to show that it is Western imperialism, rather than an unexceptional third world dictator, which represents the real threat to peace and justice around the world.

Shortly after the fighting ended Marjorie Thompson, chair of CND and the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf, wrote to the *Guardian* to condemn the British and American governments for fighting 'a war that could have been avoided and for war aims they could not publicly admit' (7 March 1991). Yet one of the main reasons why the war was not avoided was that Thompson's campaign, and its equivalents in other countries, publicly endorsed the war aims to which the Western governments did admit. CND's post-war emphasis on the need for Western governments to stop arms sales to the third world further encourages the view that Arabs and others are untrustworthy people who must be policed by the West. By fuelling such racist prejudice, the campaign which calls itself a peace movement is helping pave the way for further imperialist adventures.





One thing which links the Iraqis and the Vietnamese is the experience of being carpet-bombed by American B-52s

PHOTO: Simon Horton



# Beyond the Vietnam Syndrome?

It must have seemed bizarre to many British people to hear American pundits and politicians describe the battle in the Gulf as 'the last chapter of the Vietnam War'—a war which was fought a continent and 20 years away. So what is it that links Kuwait with Vietnam in the minds of the US establishment?

● Mike Freeman examines how defeat in South-east Asia came to symbolise a national malaise in the USA, and questions the assumption that success in the Gulf means all that has changed

'One US soldier...carried an American flag to the gates of the American diplomatic compound in Kuwait City. He said it had been given to him during the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam by a marine who died in his arms.' (*Guardian*, 27 February 1991, the day of the Western occupation of Kuwait)

'This will put paid to the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.' (President George Bush to reporters as he strode along the beach at Kennebunkport on 16 February, the weekend before the launch of the ground offensive against Iraq)

**T**he president of the USA and influential figures in the American establishment believe that their triumph over Iraq has finally laid the ghost of Vietnam to rest. The USA's defeat in the war that raged in South-east Asia from 1964 to 1973 was its greatest national humiliation, provoking a deep revulsion against further military intervention in the third world. Yet, less than 20 years after its withdrawal from Vietnam, the USA has apparently won its revenge against the third world and has reasserted its global authority. In the midst of the Gulf War president Bush reassured the American public, in his state of the union address at the end of January, that 'we lead the world in facing down a threat to decency and humanity'.

However, the 'Vietnam Syndrome' cannot be understood merely in terms of foreign policy. The USA's defeat in Vietnam was not only a setback to its global role, it became

part of a broader crisis of confidence in the American way of life at home. In recent months many commentators have observed how the US political and military authorities seemed to be trying to re-fight the Vietnam War in the deserts of the Middle East. The haunting presence of Vietnam in the thoughts of US strategists reflects the persistence of the deep malaise that this episode exposed in American society. Despite the euphoria following the USA's military success against Iraq, and the apparent opening up of new foreign policy options as a result, the domestic manifestations of the Vietnam Syndrome remain far from resolved.

One of the most enduring myths about the Vietnam War, and one that has been recycled during the Gulf crisis, is the notion that the American generals were obliged to fight 'with one hand tied behind their backs'. According to this view the military leaders were restrained in the prosecution of the war by pressures of public opinion at home and by a concern for third world sensitivities. The conclusion that was drawn from this assessment by influential Vietnam veterans such as US chief of staff Colin Powell and Gulf commander Norman Schwarzkopf is that 'next time' US forces should 'go in with overwhelming force, go in quickly and once it's over get out' (*Guardian*, 11 February 1991). While the value of this myth in legitimising the use of maximum military force in the Gulf is clear, it bears little relation to the reality of the Vietnam War.

According to Gabriel Kolko in his authoritative history of the Vietnam War, the USA in Vietnam 'unleashed the greatest flood of firepower against a nation known in history' (*Vietnam: Anatomy of War, 1940-75*, 1986). American planes dropped 7m tons of bombs on Vietnam, twice the total dropped on Europe and Asia during the Second World War, approximately one 500lb bomb for every man, woman and child in the country. They also sprayed vast areas of the country with defoliants, in a form of chemical warfare that produced widespread famine and left a legacy of children born with congenital abnormalities. Out of a population of around 18m at least two million were killed. From the point of view of the Vietnamese peasant it must have been difficult to discern signs of restraint in the conduct of the war by the USA.

In fact opposition to the Vietnam War at home emerged very slowly and only assumed a mass scale after the USA had already experienced significant military setbacks. The key turning point was the Tet offensive in



January 1968 when the liberation movement staged simultaneous uprisings in the major cities and other supposed strongholds of the stooge South Vietnamese government. By then US fatalities had already passed 40 000 and more than 250 000 had been wounded in action. Over the next two years influential voices in the American establishment began to question the advisability of pursuing a war that was proving more and more costly in human and financial terms without any prospect of victory. In September 1969 *Fortune* magazine published a poll of 500 heads of leading corporations which revealed that Vietnam was widely considered one of the nation's most critical problems. In this climate of establishment concern, the anti-war movement gathered momentum through 1969 to reach a peak of mass protests in spring 1970. This movement certainly contributed to the pressure for US withdrawal, but it was very much a secondary factor in the Vietnam defeat. The decisive factor was the strength and resilience of the national liberation movement in Vietnam, its deep popular roots in the rural areas and the support it received from the Soviet Union and China.

Though the anti-Vietnam War movement played only a minor role in the USA's withdrawal from Vietnam, it was a significant indicator of a deepening disillusionment within American society as the war dragged on. The early sixties marked the zenith of US global hegemony and domestic stability. The USA had emerged from the Second World War as the world's dominant capitalist power and it had used the Cold War to consolidate its ascendancy over both Europe and the third world. Its vast economy underpinned the global status of the dollar. The presidency of the youthful John F Kennedy reflected the confidence and dynamism of the American establishment. Through his 'peace corps' and 'alliance for progress', Kennedy projected a progressive vision of the future at home and abroad. Yet, within a couple of years Kennedy had been assassinated and the USA was already sliding towards large-scale military involvement in Vietnam. Kennedy's mission rapidly degenerated in Vietnam into a crude anti-communist apology for propping up a corrupt and repressive dictatorship.

Under Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the USA entered a period of unprecedented turmoil. The administration's military commitment to Vietnam escalated rapidly while its commitment to an

ambitious programme of reforms, notably in response to the growing demands of America's black population, went into reverse. The result was a mounting toll of death and destruction in Vietnam and a series of ghetto riots of growing ferocity that affected most major cities in the USA. By 1968 the USA seemed on the verge of self-destruction. In response to the Tet offensive, Johnson announced his decision to withdraw from the presidential contest and opened negotiations with the Vietnamese in Paris. As anti-Vietnam War protests spread around college campuses, the assassination of Martin Luther King sparked off another wave of ghetto riots; within weeks Robert Kennedy too was assassinated in the middle of his presidential campaign. Black power activists turned to the urban guerrilla tactics of the Black Panthers and the Democratic Party convention in Chicago was attended by bloody street battles.

### All-time low

In November 1968 Richard Nixon was elected president on the promise of ending the war; he immediately extended the bombing to Cambodia in pursuit of a 'quick victory'. It was four more miserable and bitter years until March 1973, when the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam was completed. The next month began the first of the government resignations over the Watergate scandal that was to culminate the following year in proceedings for the impeachment of the president and Nixon's final resignation. Nearly a decade of war and genocide in South-east Asia had been accompanied at home by a growing scale of riots, assassinations, mass demonstrations, draft card burnings, insurrectionary fantasies and brutal state repression. Desertion, disaffection, defiance of the draft and sheer demoralisation had seriously sapped the USA's military capacity. The presidency had reached an all-time low in public esteem, and even the USA's economic power was in decline. In 1971 it registered its first trade deficit, devalued the dollar and abandoned the fixed exchange rate established at Bretton Woods after the Second World War.

Though the most visible and vocal opposition to the Vietnam War came from students, opinion polls revealed strong anti-war sentiment among wide layers of American society, notably among older people, blue-collar workers and lower-income groups. Hostility towards the war was associated, according to Kolko, with a 'wider alienation from the

political system', with 'an inchoate, pre-political hostility towards the system, largely along class lines'. The government was well aware of these sentiments as the confidential documents leaked to the press in the form of the 'Pentagon papers' in 1971 revealed. In May 1967 assistant secretary for defence John McNaughton confided that he was 'very deeply concerned about the breadth and intensity of public unrest and dissatisfaction with the war...especially with young people, the underprivileged, the intelligentsia and the women' (quoted in H Zinn, *A People's History of the USA*, 1980). Well before the big anti-war protests began, McNaughton summed up the administration's concerns concisely:

'The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring thousands of non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission, on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one. It could conceivably produce a costly distortion of the American national consciousness.'

By 1968 McNaughton's nightmare had become a reality.

The anti-war movement was concentrated in the elite universities and dominated by the articulate, educated, privileged section of the nation's youth. Though in the later stages of the war it mobilised some disillusioned GIs and some black groups, it generally failed to rally the alienated working class revealed in opinion surveys. Nevertheless, as Kolko argues, the large scale and chaotic character of its protests made it a force for social disorder which gave it a significant influence:

'The anti-war movement accurately reflected the organisational, political and intellectual disorder of America at mid-century by creating a politicised form of inchoate but nonetheless real opposition.'

By the close of the sixties, maintaining stability at home had become as important for the American establishment as continuing the quest for victory in Vietnam. Given the weakness of the American left and its inability to politicise the diverse and diffuse oppositional forces of the sixties, the ending of the war led to its rapid marginalisation and to the containment of anti-system trends. The widespread underlying loss of faith in the system, however, persisted.

'Never again' was the sentiment



that brought Jimmy Carter to the presidency of a chastened nation in 1976. Yet by the close of his term of office, the USA, troubled by economic decline and third world instability, was already beginning to question the post-Vietnam reticence about overseas intervention. Shaken by the fall of the USA's loyal ally the Shah of Iran, in January 1980 he proclaimed 'the Carter doctrine': the USA was prepared to use military force to secure its vital interests in the Gulf. Carter established a 'rapid deployment force' of up to 300 000 men and a string of bases around the Middle East to achieve these objectives. The US administration, however, had little confidence that it could achieve results with such a force.

## The USA's success against Iraq cannot be attributed to the discovery by Bush of a sense of national purpose

Back in 1975 top US foreign policy adviser Henry Kissinger had balanced the pros and cons of occupying Saudi Arabia and securing its oil wells for the West. On the positive side, unlike in Vietnam, there were 'no trees, very few men and a clear objective' (quoted in MT Klare, *Beyond the Vietnam Syndrome: US Interventionism in the 1980s*, 1981). On the other hand, there were serious risks, which Kissinger considered outweighed the possible advantages. He noted that Saudi Arabia, like many potential adversaries in the region (Klare's list includes Libya, Syria, Iraq and South Yemen), was armed with advanced weapons provided by both the West and the Soviet Union. Taking on such a state would risk much higher Western casualties than occurred in Vietnam. The second reservation was concerned with the likely Soviet reaction: this might lead to a rapid escalation to nuclear, or at least third world war.

Throughout the eighties the USA carefully limited its involvement in third world conflicts, preferring covert support for counter-insurgency in Central America and southern Africa to direct engagement. The results of bolder military initiatives

were not auspicious. Carter's 1980 commando raid to rescue hostages from Iran was a fiasco; Reagan was forced to pull the marines out of Beirut in 1983 after 241 of them were killed by a massive suicide bomb. Though the invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 faced little resistance, it later became clear that a significant number of US casualties resulted from 'friendly fire' from badly coordinated forces.

What changed to give the USA such confidence to launch a major military offensive against Iraq? It is immediately apparent that the key to the USA's success, and the crucial difference between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, is the collapse of the Soviet Union as a world power and the demise of Stalinism in the third world. The disintegration of the Stalinist system (including China) as a global counterweight to the capitalist powers has given the USA and its allies a free hand in the Middle East. Whereas in the past a country like Iraq, standing against the West, could rely on at least a modicum of Soviet backing, today it is forced to face the imperialist powers alone.

Until recently one of Iraq's major weapons suppliers, the Soviet Union assisted the allies in the Gulf War by providing intelligence on Iraq's military potential. Furthermore, neighbouring Arab powers once also closely allied to the Soviet Union—Egypt, Syria—joined the Western alliance and deployed their forces against Iraq. Other formerly radical regimes—Libya, Iran—took an equivocal stand. Whereas in 1975 Kissinger feared that a US attack on a Gulf state might precipitate nuclear war, today the Soviet Union can only offer its services as a go-between in negotiations. The contrast with the Vietnam War is also striking: though Soviet and Chinese support for the liberation movement was limited, it proved crucial in enabling it to survive and carry on the war against the Americans.

### The backbone

The collapse of Stalinism has also removed a political tradition which has long provided cohesion for nationalist movements in the third world. In Vietnam, the official communist movement provided the backbone of the national liberation struggle. Its radical nationalist programme provided a flexible ideology for linking up agrarian, urban and anti-imperialist struggles, and for uniting peasants, workers and intellectuals in the anti-Western movement. Confronting a decadent and repressive ruling elite, Stalinism maintained mass popular support

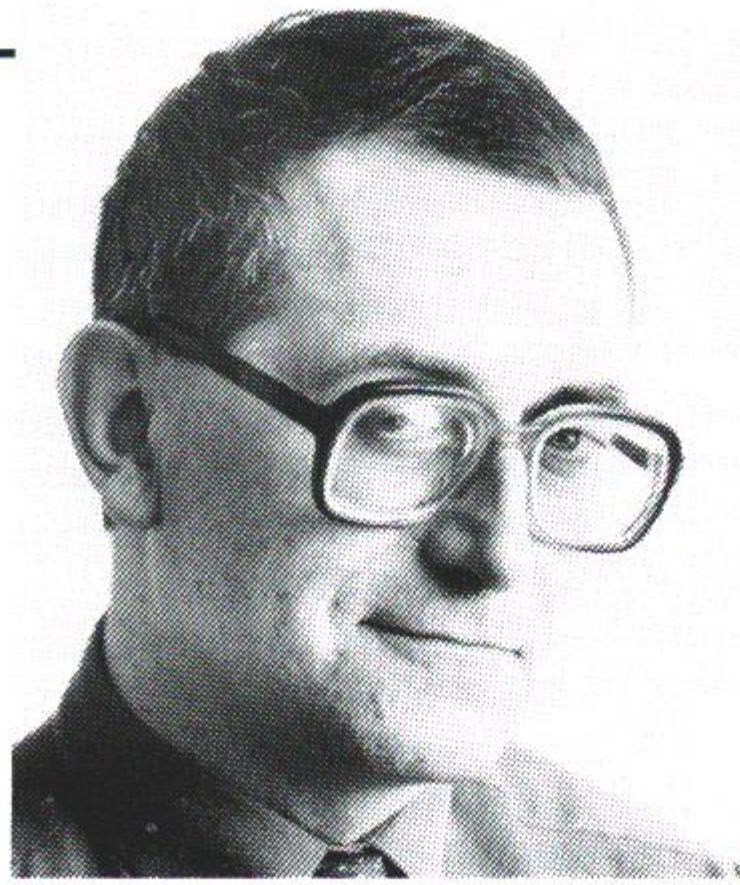
and ensured a high morale in the resistance movement despite the terrible sufferings of the war. The communist movement also provided an international network of solidarity, of more psychological than practical significance. The contrast with the regime attempting to resist the West in Baghdad could not be more striking. Saddam Hussein's eclectic mixture of Arab nationalism, Baath socialism and appeals to Islamic traditions could not cohere popular support for his regime in face of the overwhelming Western assault—hence the evident collapse in morale among many Iraqi troops.

The USA's success against Iraq cannot be attributed to the military genius of Schwarzkopf and Powell, nor to the rediscovery by Bush of a sense of national identity and purpose. It is attributable to the demise of the Soviet Union and of Stalinism as global forces which could impede American imperialism—a fact symbolised by the USA's contemptuous dismissal of various eleventh hour Soviet peace proposals.

There is now much discussion of the prospects of a khaki election in the USA with the dream ticket of Bush and Powell sweeping the Republican Party to another term in presidential office. This team may well succeed against the Democrats as they have succeeded against Saddam Hussein. But they should not confuse short-term success in foreign policy or electoral terms with success in overcoming the legacy of the Vietnam Syndrome in American society.

Opinion polls during the Gulf War confirm the same general pattern that prevailed during the Vietnam War: workers, women, ethnic minorities are increasingly alienated from the values of the American establishment. The shift of students and the intelligentsia to the right since Vietnam, a process accelerated in the USA as in Britain during the Gulf War, can only reinforce the depoliticisation and atomisation of the American working class. At the same time deepening recession and poverty in the richest country in the world can only undermine attempts by Bush and his supporters to persuade the American public that 'if anyone tells you that America's best days are behind her, they are looking the wrong way'. Many commentators have observed that Bush and his allies have a lot of work to do to translate their military victory into long-term political results in the Middle East. Their task at home is, if anything, more difficult still.





Don Milligan

## Stormin' Norman and gay sex

**F**reddie, Britain's most approachable dolphin has been sexually assaulted. The police have informed the Crown Prosecution Service, and divers on the Northumbrian coast are reported as 'very troubled'. I was planning to share all this with you but I'm afraid *sub judice* has intervened. Instead I'm going to have to tell you of an evening I recently spent with Norman Stone, Oxford's professor of modern history.

Normally, 'Norman Stone' is not a name one could drop with any great effect, but he's been in the news a lot lately: an expert on Russia, a specialist on the German national character, an adviser to the cabinet and a Wapping pundit. So I was excited when—quite by chance—we met. I was leaving a function at Oxford town hall. Across the throng, Norman's eyes caught mine, we smiled, and he invited me to a nearby pub. I bought the drinks, and got pleasantly woozy, while he got sentimental about Russia and something called the 'Russian soul'. It was all entirely innocent. He waxed lyrical in his extraordinary leery-beery style about babushkas and queues, about Soviet prudery and about what an enchanting, chaotic, lovable lot the Russians are. He was prepared to give credit where it was due and there, in the saloon

the years, in public and in private, Norman has perfected this sort of approach to life. Bigotry without malice and malevolent charm have become his stock-in trade. It enables him to remain unruffled and unsoiled while he honks common sense about the place. He even managed to express my own confusion and irritation about the latest gay protests.

It is not that I object to men kissing each other on the steps of Bow Street police station. I've kissed a man or two there myself. No, it's this business of them attempting to turn themselves in for 'soliciting' and 'procuring' that left me nonplussed. I think I'd be happier with a more combative sort of approach. Surrender doesn't appeal, not even when it's just for publicity. And another thing...I'm beginning to get very irritated (and utterly confused) by the legalistic opposition to the government's latest anti-gay measures. It's all 'the Act of 1956, Circular 73, the Act of 1967, Clause 25, Paragraph 16, and the eighth sentence from the top of the page'. Norman's quite right, it doesn't really convey the gravity of the situation. What is more, when health minister Virginia Bottomley or good old John Patten (over at the home office) agree to move a comma, drop a full-stop, or delete a phrase, confusion reigns supreme.

public place is not permitted because it would be lewd and obscene and may occasion a breach of the peace. Introducing our different gay friends to each other is illegal. It's also illegal if a gay man stops to chat up another gay man in the street.

It is true that there are no penalties for two gay men who commit acts of gross indecency with each other in a room to which nobody else has access. Of course, they must both be over 21 and they must both be civilians. However, everything that they do in order to get themselves into this happy position is illegal. It is illegal for them to invite each other to be grossly indecent. This would be soliciting. And, anybody who facilitated their being together in order to be grossly indecent would be a procurer.

The idea of 'consenting' sexual offenders is a misnomer. A gay man between the ages of 16 and 20 can be as willing as he likes but he cannot consent to an act of gross indecency. If he willingly commits an act of gross indecency he has, nevertheless, been 'assaulted' as far as the authorities are concerned because he cannot lawfully consent. Similarly, older gay men break a host of laws, transgress numerous circulars, regulations, rules and even railway by-laws, because they insist on meeting each other, going to clubs, propositioning each other, dancing, kissing, cuddling and having sex. As a result homosexuals appear to be peculiarly hedonistic and sex-obsessed. They are defined almost entirely by their sexual status and by no other quality. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that homosexuals, both men and women, are deemed unsuitable to care for children or even to live in the same house with children. Consequently, lesbians and gay men, often as a matter of course, lose custody of their own children. They are regularly humiliated in the courts and are automatically turned away by adoption agencies.

The point about all this is that homosexuals are no good to themselves, let alone the children. The reason? Narcissism, 'extraordinary destructiveness' and self-hatred. This, after much study, is the Oxford professor's opinion. Norman is an expert on destructiveness, on himself, and also on narcissism, so he is more competent than most to comment. What he has grasped is that homosexuality is an *illegal* deviation. He is not troubled by Clause This or Paragraph That. He understands the essence of the matter—the police should crack down where necessary, and not waste public money when it is not. He is an easy-going sort of bigot who likes to present his banal opinions and casual brutality as moderation; he thinks they're the sign of a man with a sense of proportion.

We need the same sense of proportion. We don't want to fiddle about with statutes and regulations. We don't want to get publicity by attempting to get the police to arrest us. It is quite simple. We need equality. So we want all the laws, rules and regulations that ban or restrict same-sex relationships abolished. Nothing more, nothing less. Now, even an *Oxford Don* should be able to grasp that.

## Male homosexuality is already illegal and has been for more than a century

bar (after several drinks), Norman struck me as such a very wise, perceptive, sort of chap. It was then that I understood why (despite his carefree liquid charm) he occupies such an exalted social position.

I'm telling you all this because my opinion of Norman as a truly great communicator of homely truths was raised even higher by an article he wrote for London's *Evening Standard*. It was called: 'The gays do protest too much.' It was a *tour de force* in the expression of public opinion. Norman was able to ventilate every nuance of the popular hatred of homosexuals. And he managed to do so as if he was talking indulgently about some old roué; an old debauched friend, unseemly and self-indulgent, but a *pal* nevertheless. It's a style of writing Norman derived from a trick he learned as an undergraduate. It's called: 'How to vomit all over the pavement and completely miss your shoes.' Over

The attempt by gay radicals to highlight shifts in government policy towards homosexuals by adopting the lingo and tactics of parliamentary lawyers fails to communicate what the problem actually is. Focusing attention on ministerial circulars and draft legislation tends to conceal the fact that male homosexuality is already illegal and has been so for more than a century.

When I'm in a pub or a café with my boyfriend we have to be careful that we don't seem too intimate in case our behaviour is construed as likely to cause a breach of the peace. It's illegal when I stay at his flat and it's illegal when he stays at mine. The reason for this is that when we go to bed, there are usually people present in other rooms. In law, a place is not deemed private if a third party has access to it. Consequently, a package holiday would present problems, as would booking into a boarding house or hotel. Dancing together in a



Ribble by-election

# Grey shadows in the valley

The Tory defeat in Ribble Valley was reported as a dramatic upset. But, as Andrew Calcutt reports from Lancashire, this most boring of by-elections won't break the mould of British politics

**L**iberal Democrat Mike Carr caused a sensation when he overturned a 20 000 Tory majority to win the Ribble Valley by-election on 7 March 1991. The result underlined the crisis of Conservative politics. But the campaign also showed that, despite this setback, the Tories remain well-placed to defeat their uninspiring opponents and win the forthcoming general election.

The Ribble Valley swing (24.7 per cent) was the biggest against a Tory candidate since Shirley Williams won Crosby for the newly formed Social Democratic Party in 1981. Back then the Tories could dismiss such a defeat as teething troubles, since they were just starting to implement their radical programme. Today, however, the swing against them comes after all their policies have been tried, tested and found wanting. Many Tories are keen to distance themselves from 'that bloody woman'. But they have no new policies to replace the failed ones associated with her. The packaging of John Major as a nice man in pullover and slacks provided a few weeks' grace. The Gulf War was an extra fillip. But beneath the talk about 'the most popular prime minister since Churchill', Major has failed to overcome the political paralysis and internal feuds prompted by the exhaustion of the Tory agenda.

Ribble caused ructions in the ranks. When the result was announced, the majority of Tory MPs agreed that the poll tax must go. A minority called for Major to stick to Thatcher's guns and keep the poll tax alive. Major said he had come to a decision about the poll tax but felt unable to say what it was. Commentators started comparing his obtuse remarks to the 'circumlocutory style' of Neil Kinnock. That anyone could liken a Conservative premier to the windbag of the Labour Party indicates how far the Tories have fallen since their supremely confident high-point in the summer of 1987. A year after the riots, the party which built its reputation on decisiveness still could not get its act together on the poll tax.

All is not gloom, however, in Conservative central office. Party chairman Chris Patten knows that the Tory defeat in Ribble Valley was the result of a protest vote by middle class owner-occupiers of gentrified but low-rated terraced housing who were miffed to find themselves facing poll tax bills of £400 a head. The exit poll which accurately predicted the Ribble result also showed that most of those who voted Liberal Democrat in March would return to the Tory fold in the event of a general election. During the campaign, neither of

the opposition parties demonstrated the initiative necessary to win over Tory voters on a permanent basis. It was a case of the bland leading the bland.

A typical Labour press conference at the Starkie Arms in Clitheroe featured shadow transport minister John Prescott reading a prepared text on cuts in rural services. Prescott was clearly bored by his material—and he was supposed to have written it. The effect on those listening to it can be imagined. Josie Farrington, the Labour candidate and veteran of local authority politics, also read from a set text. Described as 'doleful' by some

pervades the morning press conferences', complained Nicholas Wood in the *Times*.

The Liberal Democrats pitched their camp in the Swan and Royal across the road. On the Friday before polling day their press conference featured home affairs spokesman Robert Maclennan (remember him?) on the benefits of proportional representation. To the journalists present, this was a 'dog bites man' story. The Liberal Democrats press officer tried to interest them by emphasising that dashing Paddy Ashdown would be visiting Fulwood barracks later that day. Photo-opportunities, not political debate, were the mainstay of the Ribble campaigns.

All three parties have been searching for a 'Big Idea' around which to galvanise public support. Having failed to find it, each of them spent the Ribble campaign trying to sell their lack of ideas as a positive virtue, attacking their opponents for being 'dogmatic' and having an 'ideology', while emphasising their own pragmatism. All three candidates sounded as if they were trying to pass off empty-headedness as a sign of superior intelligence.

There were no new ideas on display in Ribble Valley. Instead, the campaign reflected how far the opposition parties have adopted Tory values over the past decade. Liberal Democrat victor Mike Carr used to be a Tory councillor, and hasn't changed his politics noticeably. He didn't even ask Ribble voters to turn against the government, arguing instead that voting for him on 7 March would 'give Major a chance and send him a message at the same time'. At an all-candidates' meeting in the village of Ribchester, Labour's Josie Farrington supported law and order using a hushed tone reminiscent of Thatcher herself. All three were for the Gulf War as a matter of course. One of the fringe candidates, rebel Liberal Simon Taylor, interjected: 'The Green candidate and I are the only



PHOTO: Andrew Calcutt

L to R: Labour, Liberal Democrat, Tory—but all three were in the centre

reporters, she did all that could be asked of an assembly-kit Kinnockite candidate. Everything she said sounded as if it had been memorised from Walworth Road briefings. Her answers to journalists' questions—not that there were that many—were as sanitised as press coverage of the Gulf War.

Next door in the Conservative club, employment minister Michael Howard spoke on Employment Training. His lack of enthusiasm was so obvious it crossed my mind that he might even have been on an ET scheme himself. Tory candidate Nigel Evans, a chipper Welshman who seemed to be permanently blushing, bravely declared 'it is a Conservative dream that John Major was elected and that Ribble Valley Conservative Association selected a Swansea shopkeeper'. But even Conservative newspapers remained unmoved by Evans' egalitarian dream-ticket. 'A curious lassitude

ones here who are not Conservative.'

The voters of Ribble Valley were not impressed by any of the campaigns. 'They come up here saying they're going to do things they never do', said a waitress in one of Clitheroe's numerous tea-shops. 'They keep canvassing your house until you're sick of it.' There was no bandwagon atmosphere. Even the Liberal Democrats admitted they didn't know where their votes came from.

Ribble was billed as a possible dummy-run for a khaki election. It is more likely to be remembered as the precursor of a grey election—one in which the Tories still look capable of beating their lifeless opponents, despite all the government's problems. Events beyond Major's control, like the recession, could still upset his plans. But in the kingdom of grey men (and grey women), the original grey man looks likely to remain king.



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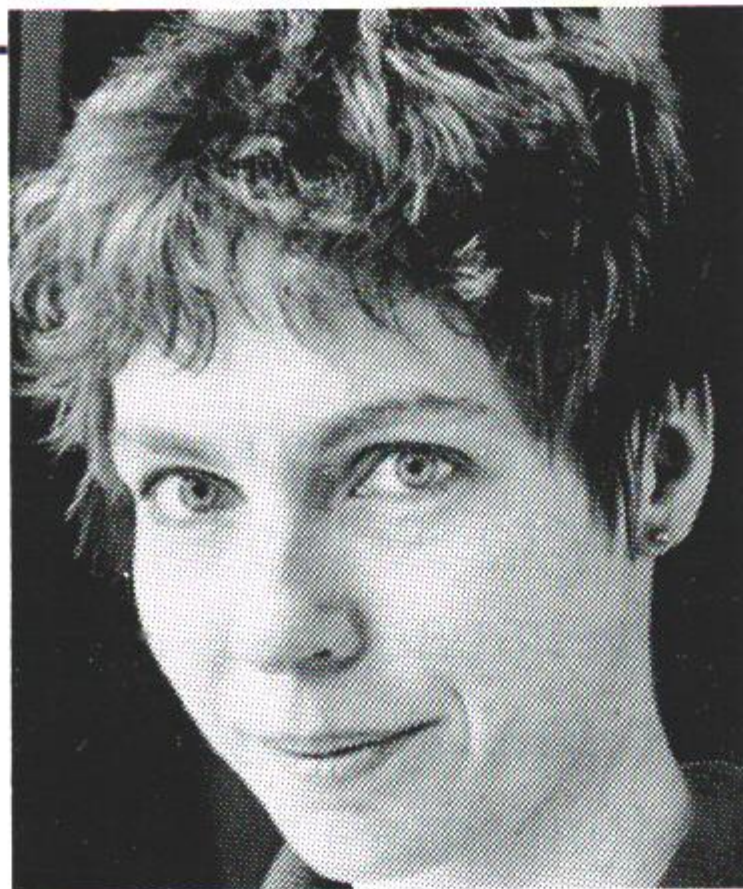
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Ann Bradley

## Different mags for different worlds

**T**he 'women's magazine' is a great institution. I read them avidly, fascinated by the way an editor can fill a magazine, week after week, with absolute trivia and still sell it. Every week *Woman* and *Woman's Own* are read by around a million women, and yet every single issue is more or less the same.

Buy a copy of either this week and I promise you it will contain the following articles. There will be a 'life of a famous person' feature, a 'terribly brave ordinary person' feature and a 'would-you-believe-it' feature, often with a slightly anti-foreign feel. The famous person will probably be a soap star explaining how fame has not changed his/her life. The brave person is likely to be a parent of a handicapped child, a sufferer of a dreadful disease or someone who's survived a terrifying experience. The heart-wrenching stories throw your own little miseries into relief. Child prostitution in the third world, bullfighting in Spain or horse-eating in France are suitable shock-horror stories to make you glad that 'it isn't like that here'.

The features are wrapped around lots and lots of practical advice pages: how to cope with cystitis, a step-by-step guide to Eccles cakes, and how to transform your bathroom for under £20. There will also be a diet or exercise routine, a few fashion pages and, of course, the problem pages—which everybody reads first. These magazines are survival guides for the woman with a family. Women buy them as a substitute for a gossip with a neighbour. The features confirm that money isn't everything and that your life may be humdrum but at least it's normal.

*Woman's Own* calls its contents page 'Our world'. 'Our world' is, of course, a world of home and family. The magazine takes 'home and family issues' and treats them with as much seriousness as the *Economist* treats a multinational takeover. An article on how to run a kiddies' party not only provides advice on how to do it, it confirms that such an event is of vital importance, and that you are important because you organise it. You'll find the importance of domestic skills in 'younger' women's magazines too. In between their articles

about looking good and managing your sex life you'll find the same 'how to run a party' article—but this time it's a party for yourself, not your kids.

The more glossy, up-market monthlies have much the same approach as the formula weeklies but with a different reader in mind. The handy hints are for the young working woman, so sex and romance replace children and husband as chief preoccupations. You are guided through your make-up routine, your fashion sense. Instead of recipes for 'teatime treats' you'll find 'food to spice up your life', while career tips replace shopping hints—usually these are of the 'how to make it in a man's world' variety. The high turnover of the glossies is due to their 'you're not alone' appeal. *She* sells itself as 'the magazine for women who juggle their lives', *Company* targets young women in 'the freedom years'. The sales pitch is always that 'we write for women like you'. Women choose the magazine that best fits their life and are comforted that it confirms the importance of their preoccupations.

Women's magazines are a celebration of women's position in society. They take the roles we are expected to fulfil as women and write about them as though they are a great and complex art. They confirm that the day-to-day routine of cooking, caring and looking good really is the most important thing in your life.

There is no male equivalent of the women's magazine. Even when the crop of new men's magazines has the same items on the contents page they are dealt with differently. *GQ* and *Arena* have pages of men looking chic in Italian suits, but this hardly means that the nineties man is under as much fashion pressure as the nineties woman. *GQ*'s fashion pages are just fancy wrapping for articles on how the *Times* covered the Gulf War and the last days of the Ceausescus in Romania. The meat of the magazine is substantial current affairs coverage—you don't find that in women's magazines.

You only have to look at the way domestic skills are dealt with in men's magazines to see the assumption that men have very different interests. Compare the way the 'première' magazine for 'man

at his best', *Esquire*, treats the art of cooking a pheasant. The article is an intriguing account of the shoot where the dinner was bagged followed by a discussion about when the pheasant was introduced to Britain. Only the last three paragraphs, in a page-long piece, actually deal with cooking it. And then, rather than being elevated to a great skill, it's trivialised. We are simply told to 'hack the carcasses and bung them in a pot with a bit of wine or cider and water. Add the usual things for making a stock, bring to the boil and get on with whatever else you need to cook'.

In women's magazines you never bung something in a pot with a bit of anything. You carefully weigh and measure, blend, sauté, for a precise number of minutes. Cooking is complicated. A comparable women's mag article on cooking a pheasant would not only give details of how to deal with the pheasant but also what the appropriate accompaniments would be. For 'him' cooking dinner is second to making witty conversation, to 'her' it is supposed to be the major job.

In the mid-eighties IPC magazines launched a young men's magazine with a similar brief to the glossy women's mags. It ran articles on 'life as a male model', 'living on your own without mum' and a short story about an office boy's crush on an older female sales executive. It was not popular. In fact it crashed. The lads were insulted.

Some women are insulted by the vacuousness of women's magazines, but I suspect that most of us find them more entertaining than insulting. They are fun because they address the preoccupations that we, as women, are supposed to have—and often do have, despite ourselves. We read the magazine tongue-in-cheek and ridicule the articles on how to wash your Shetland sweater—then we secretly cut out the washing advice and hope it means an end to the shrinking sweater. The trivia in women's magazines has appeal precisely because the nineties woman still has to cope with the trivia of everyday life. A woman's world still exists and the magazines reflect it.

They take the roles we are expected to fulfil  
as women and write about them as though they are a  
great and complex art



In 'Midnight in the Century', Frank Richards notes that 'for the time being at least, the working class has no political existence'. Some of our critics have seized upon this as proof that we have joined the consensus (now extending from John Major to *Marxism Today*) which believes that changes in the capitalist system have radically altered the class structure of society. In short, we have been accused of writing off the working class and abandoning the anti-capitalist struggle.

In fact the whole purpose of 'Midnight in the Century' (and indeed of *Living Marxism*) is to help produce a contemporary brand of working class politics which is equipped to challenge the myths of modern capitalism. In this light, let us try to clarify what has and has not changed about the capitalist system and its relationship with the working class.

Today we are surrounded by evidence that the essence of capitalism has changed little. The basic Marxist proposition that capitalism is a crisis-ridden system, incapable of consistently raising the productive capacity of society, is borne out once more by the current economic recession. The relevance of the Marxist theory of imperialism, which identifies an inherent tendency towards war and oppression within modern capitalism, has been graphically illustrated by events in the Gulf.

But within the basic framework of capitalism, society and the lifestyles to which it gives rise have developed considerably during our century. Innumerable studies have been produced to demonstrate the decline of the traditional industrial proletariat, the rise of a new white-collar workforce, and the accompanying alterations in lifestyle. The proliferation of everything from camcorders to Continental holidays has been held up as evidence that the working class is a dying breed.

The changes and developments in employment patterns do not, however, fundamentally alter the class structure of society. The outward appearance of the capitalist class has also been modernised, in parallel with the changes experienced by the working class. While British workers have tended to move from industry to services and from blue-collar jobs to white, the typical British capitalist has changed from a captain of industry to a financial fixer. Neither the employee nor the employer looks or lives as they did 50 or even 20 years ago. But the boss-worker relationship between the two remains intact—as the workers will quickly discover if the boss is not making sufficient profits.

During the current recession, we may not have

## 'For the first time this century, capitalism face Frank Richards, 'Midnight in the Century', *Living*

Frank Richards' feature 'Midnight in the Century' has been the cause of much debate on the left. It has sparked controversy both because of its sober assessment of the situation facing Marxists in the present, and its argument that these problems are largely the legacy of the left-wing politics of the past.

The debate around 'Midnight in the Century' is one which we are keen to pursue in the pages of *Living Marxism* over the months ahead, to encourage the

seen thousands of cloth-capped workers laid off by the owners of steelworks, mills and mines. But we have seen thousands made redundant by the boards of the big banks, retail chains and airlines. And some of the new-style capitalists are taking steps which their predecessors only dreamed of; we are now witnessing what could be the start of a wave of cash wage-cuts, of a sort unheard of for half a century in British industry. These developments demonstrate more forcefully than any sociological survey that the majority of people are still part of a working class. They survive by selling an employer their ability to work; and if he cuts their job or pay, they are in danger of losing their house, car and camcorder.

The changes in modern Britain have not altered the *objective position* of the working class in society; but they have helped to reshape the *subjective perceptions* which workers have of what is happening to them.

Today workers in general do not identify themselves as part of a class. Never mind anti-capitalist consciousness, even the far more basic trade unionist outlook is now confined to a minority of traditionalists. There is little or no belief in the ability of workers to act together, using their collective strength to oppose redundancies or other attacks from the government and employers. Ideas of collective struggle are widely seen as outdated. Indeed, the

very word 'worker' is considered a historical artefact. Thus Thomas Cook, whose employees cutting their pay, are encouraged to see themselves as travel company culture.

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There has been no collective response to the arrival of problems it brings. Workers are happening, but can see no way to appear resigned to some form of unemployment as an inevitable result which each individual must accept. The result of these developments for the first time, the employment government have not been able to solve the problems caused by them. There has been no strike wave, no effective political opposition. It has been a vindication of the proposition 'Midnight in the Century'—the working class certainly exists in a form which presently has no *political* voice.

What is the cause of this? It has become popular on both sides to see the decline of class identity as a consequence of the changes in society. This amounts to wishful

# Casting mo 'Midnight in t



## 'Neither intellectual nor practical alternatives' Living Marxism, December 1990

widest possible discussion on the way forward for revolutionary politics. In this month's *Living Marxism*, we set out to clarify what's behind the 'Midnight in the Century' thesis, in response to some of the criticisms, questions and confusions raised so far.

Over the page, Frank Richards expands upon his original arguments about settling scores with the past. Here, we present some further ideas on the future of working class politics

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the right, and buck-passing by the left. Certainly, new employment and lifestyle trends bring a questioning of old allegiances; a young woman worker in a building society or supermarket, for example, will not automatically adopt the outlook and loyalties of a middle-aged miner. But why should such changes necessarily operate to the detriment of the left? There is no automatic reason why the working class should lose all sense of identity simply because it is now exploited by capitalism in a slightly different way.

The key to explaining why the working class does not exist as a political force today lies in the failures of the old labour movement. The traditional organisations of the working class have proved incapable of adjusting to a new era, and have lagged behind the changes in the labour market. Their ideas and methods now seem irrelevant to an entire generation of workers. It is easy to see that the trade unions and the Labour Party are now largely ghettoised in their traditional industrial heartlands. But it is far more than a geographical problem. Most important, the old labour movement has proved itself politically redundant.

The failures of bureaucratic trade unionism and Labourist welfare capitalism in recent years have helped to discredit the ideas of collective action and anything associated with the working class. Workers no longer identify with a labour

movement which cannot connect with their concerns. In the absence of an alternative political movement, the working class is left without a voice in society. Thus even when protests do arise, they tend to be shaped by middle class influences; note how Tory dissidents are putting most pressure on the government over the poll tax.

The discrediting of the ideas and institutions of the old labour movement has created the apparently 'classless' climate in British politics today. In the short term this strengthens the hand of conservatism. But in the longer run it could operate to our benefit. As 'Midnight in the Century' argues, the traditions of the official labour movement tended to stifle the working class and to close the door on revolutionary Marxism. The removal of these obstacles could open up new possibilities for forging a very different current of working class politics.

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Beneath the boring surface of parliamentary affairs, British politics is now in a state of flux. Old allegiances have been called into question and even abandoned, but new ones have yet to be consolidated. The Labour Party and the SLD have joined the Tories in the marshy ground of 'the new consensus', and nobody has established a firm grip on public opinion around a distinctive political alternative. This is the fluid situation which *Living Marxism* is now seeking to influence, to act as an intellectual focus that can assist in the reconstitution of the working class as a political force.

The task now is to work out a form of anti-capitalist politics which can relate to the concerns of the new working class. This means accounting for the failures of the past, and developing a critique of contemporary capitalism, which can demystify the myths that the system is creating today. If we are to stand a chance of cohering an alternative working class voice, we have to focus on what is new about the present conjuncture. It is not enough to restate Marxist principles from the past. *Living Marxism* exists to lay the foundations for the class politics of the future.

**The original 'Midnight in the Century' feature by Frank Richards was published in the December issue of *Living Marxism*. Some copies are still available, price £1.80. See the back issues advert on the inside back cover for details.**

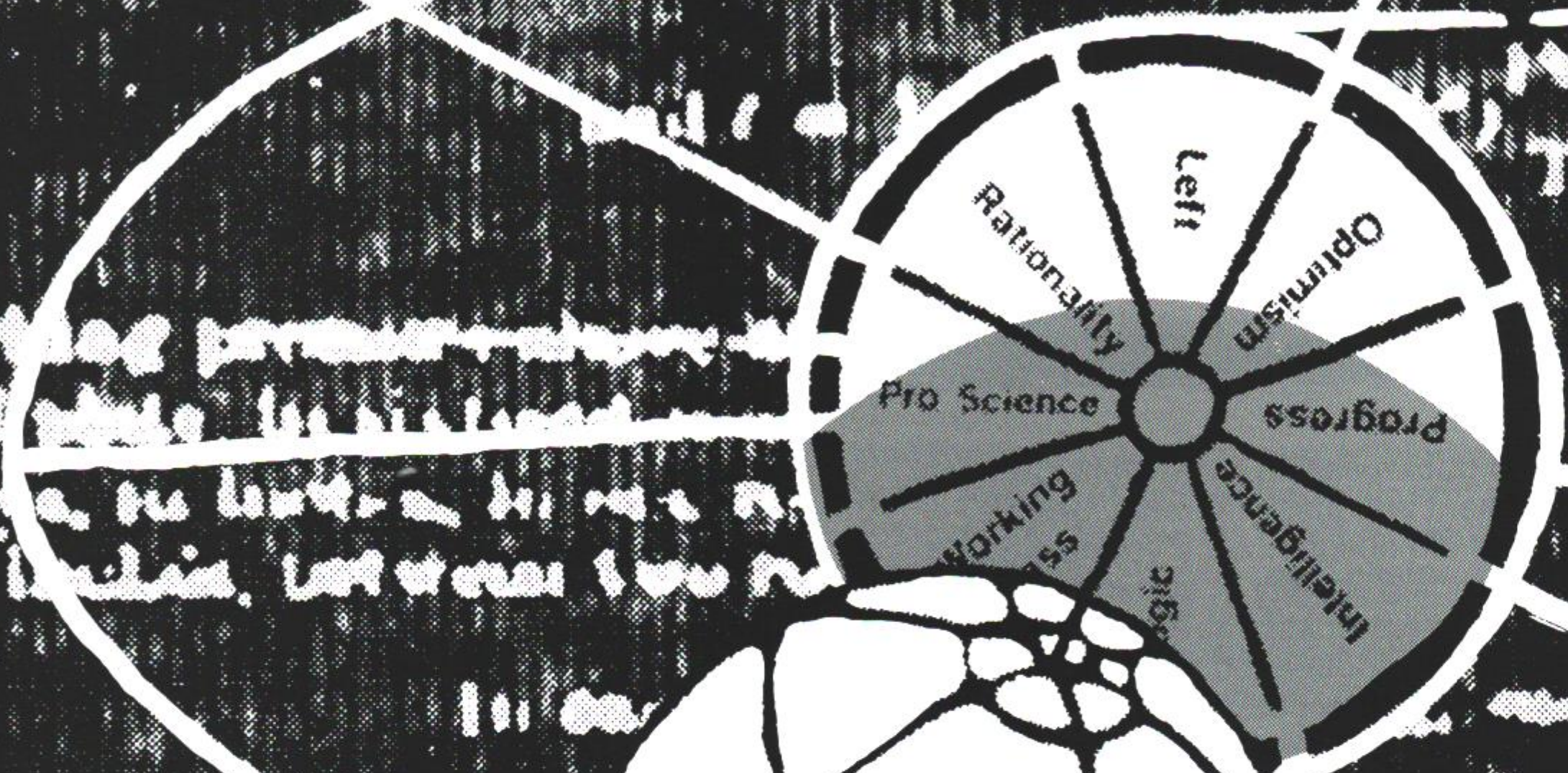
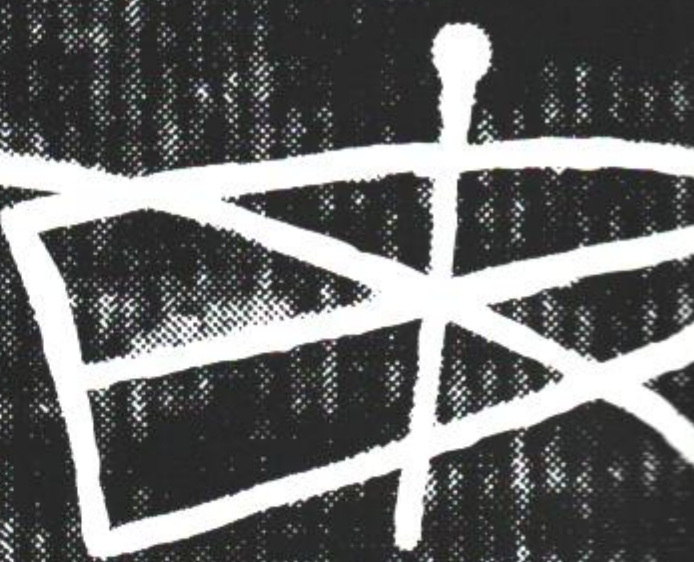
# More light on 'the Century'



Food Plans

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# Settling accounts with the past

Frank Richards responds to some of the criticisms and questions provoked by his original 'Midnight in the Century' feature

**A** lot of the reaction to 'Midnight in the Century' (*Living Marxism*, December 1990) has caricatured our arguments. It has been suggested that our prognosis is unnecessarily gloomy, that we have abandoned the project of revolutionary change, that the article writes off the working class/revolution/socialism, etc. Even correspondents who appear to agree with the analysis conclude that our sober assessment of the present conjuncture must mean that there is no potential for Marxist politics.

Such reactions to the article are puzzling, since it was written precisely to encourage the kind of political debate which the renewal of anti-capitalist politics demands. Indeed 'Midnight in the Century' explicitly warned the reader not to confuse *realism* with *pessimism*, pointing out that in the present circumstances it would be wrong to 'draw extremely negative conclusions about the prospects for change'. Instead of calling for resignation, the article suggests that through coming to terms with the experience of defeat, 'the battle to evolve a practical, anti-capitalist, intellectual alternative' can 'be joined in earnest'.

## Coming to terms

The misunderstanding of the main point of 'Midnight in the Century' is neither the result of intellectual deficiency nor of bad faith. Our critics genuinely believe that they know what the article is getting at. Their response reflects the difficulty

that all of us face in coming to terms with new circumstances.

The article implied that there can be no return to the past. From the correspondence we have received, it seems that the strong reaction to 'Midnight in the Century' has been provoked above all by this implication of its analysis. It is one thing to come to terms with particular setbacks and defeats. The expectation that the fortunes of the working class movement are bound to revive can limit the pain of the moment. But the argument that there is little left to revive strips us of safe illusions and causes profound insecurity and concern.

## Emotional difficulty

Our argument that the traditions of the past have little relevance for the struggles of the future are obviously difficult for the left to accept emotionally, never mind intellectually. If somebody has spent the better part of two decades trying to democratise the Labour Party it is not easy to come to terms with the realisation that so many years were wasted on a movement that has no future. Similarly, left-wing activists waiting for an upturn in trade union militancy are psychologically unprepared to face the grim reality that there will not be a re-run of the type of industrial struggles that we had in the sixties and seventies. It is often far easier for a teenager to grasp the plain fact that the TUC has become an industrial museum than it is for a 35-year old union activist

who remembers the seventies. It is still possible to find left-wing activists who will demand that the TUC take a lead in organising a militant campaign against the poll tax or the Gulf War. But such anachronisms are very rare indeed. Even *Socialist Worker*, which used to end every article with a call to take its arguments back to the workplace union branch, has begun to realise the futility of such a gesture.

However, it is one thing to stop calling on the union to solve this or that problem today. It is quite another to understand that the official labour movement in Britain and internationally has no capacity to regenerate itself in the period ahead. Most union and left-wing stalwarts are so thoroughly assimilated into the old labour movement that they cannot conceive of how the working class could possibly organise itself differently. From this perspective, our dismissal of the relevance of this movement is quite naturally understood as writing off the working class altogether.

## No going back

The charge that 'Midnight in the Century' writes off the working class is firmly believed by those who unfortunately can only conceive of this class organised in its particular British form as it existed during the past 40 years. In the same way, many on the left take offence at our criticism of their political movement, and in the heat of the moment draw the conclusion that we are

ILLUSTRATION: ATB



calling into question the viability of the entire anti-capitalist project.

To set things straight, it may be useful to draw out one of the central assumptions that informs the analysis in 'Midnight in the Century'. The argument that there is no going back could only appear pessimistic if you believed that the prospects for progressive change were better in the sixties and seventies than today. And it is on this point that there exists a fundamental difference between the perspectives put forward in *Living Marxism*, and traditional forms of left-wing thought. Most sections of the left, from mainstream Labour through Stalinist to those who identify with Trotskyism, express the hope and expectation that there will be a revival of the good old days. From this vantage point the argument that there is no return to the past is interpreted as negative and pessimistic.

We are pleased that the traditions of the old labour movement and left have been discredited, and glad that there is no prospect of their revival

From the point of view of our theory, however, things are reversed. Whatever the problems faced by Marxists at the present time—and they are quite formidable—the potential is greater than in previous decades. To put it bluntly, we are pleased that the traditions of the old labour movement and left have been discredited, and glad that there is no prospect for their revival. Indeed, most of the difficulties we now face are the bitter legacy of those traditions in the first place.

Let us make this point absolutely clear. The traditions of Labourism and Stalinism represented an historic dead end. As long as these traditions appeared to offer a credible alternative the prospects for the advance of revolutionary Marxism were nil. Between Stalinist Eastern Europe and the Labourist tradition

of the Western left, the revolutionary project of Marxism was subverted. And through the tragic identification of these corrupt movements with socialism, anti-capitalist politics were discredited. In these circumstances, any attempt to create an alternative political current was doomed from the start.

In the past the working class may have been organisationally stronger than today, but politically it was dying from the slow poison emitted by the Stalinist and Labourist traditions. So we have no regrets about the end of an era in which they were influential. Our only regret is that these movements were not defeated by revolutionary Marxism, but by the combined effects of blows from the right and their own implosion.

There is a price to be paid for the demise of the Stalinist-Labourist traditions; by implication, all those advocating collective action in pursuit of social emancipation are discredited in the public eye. Most people believe that the bankruptcy of the old movements includes revolutionary Marxism as well. That is the major problem we face in the fall-out from their collapse. But when all is said and done, it is far preferable to have to tackle this problem than to try to give meaning to Marxist politics in an era when Stalinism and Labourism were still in the ascendant. If we believed in God, we would thank him that we will not see their revival!

### The dark hour

The end of the previous era in class relations opens up new prospects for Marxists. Yet it appears as if the present conjuncture is far less favourable to the revolutionary project. There is a time-lag before a new era takes shape; a time-lag in which, having defeated its old adversaries, capitalism can enjoy its hour of triumph. This is the dark hour of 'Midnight in the Century'. It is important to understand, however, that the conservative mood of the moment reflects not the shape of the future, but the last legacy of the politics of the past. This is the legacy with which we must now come to terms.

Stalinism and Labourism, the working class traditions of the past, have conclusively collapsed. And the collapse of the old has not yet given way to the birth of a new alternative. Thus there is nothing on the ideological, organisational or political front that could possibly compete with capitalism. This is the unusual feature of the present moment. For the first time this century the capitalist class does not

have to worry about competing alternatives to its system. The working class is unable to express its interests through any systematic alternative.

Many on the left find it hard to accept that the working class has become globally marginalised. In their response to 'Midnight in the Century', some critics pointed to specific examples—such as the general strike in Greece, or the industrial action by East German workers, or the significant number of British workers still organised in trade unions—to prove that the proletariat still lives. Such pathetic attempts at strike-spotting or head-counting trade unionists miss the point altogether. The existence of the working class is not at issue; what is in question is its political weight.

It is an act of self-deception to take comfort from the fact that occasionally groups of workers go on strike or join unions. Such acts need to be seen in relation to the struggles of the past. Straight away it becomes evident that the role of collective action is far less significant today than at any time in the post-war period. The very fact that you have to look hard for examples proves the point. In any case, the question is not resolved through a study of strike statistics, but through a study of the politics which inform the actions of the working class.

One fact alone should serve to make us extremely sober about the present conjuncture. International capitalism is moving from a recession towards a slump. There is widespread recognition that at the very least this slump will be more destructive than any experienced since the Second World War. There are others who argue that the slump will turn into a depression on the scale of the thirties—or even worse. Without entering into the debate about the likely scale of the slump, it is safe to say that the problems facing capitalism are monumental. And yet at the moment when the capitalist system reveals its failures and problems in the most striking manner for some time, it faces no political alternative. Indeed for the first time in the twentieth century the experience of the capitalist system suffering a crisis has failed to provoke a discussion about developing alternative forms of social organisation.

In the past a depression created a mass audience for anti-capitalist politics. Alternative ideas about how to guarantee employment, raise living standards, redistribute resources, and so on, found strong support. Even in the early eighties, albeit on a modest scale, there was at least an attempt to



project an alternative economic strategy. Today such strategies are conspicuous by their absence. The failure of Labourist welfare capitalism in the West, and of Stalinist state bureaucracy in the East, have disarmed most critics of the market system. There has never been a time this century when capitalists could attempt to tackle the crisis of their system without having to worry about the threat posed by popular alternatives. The flip-side of the political marginalisation of the working class is that the ruling class feels more in control than at any time in living memory.

The absence of a working class alternative allows the employers to get on with the task of tackling their economic problems with a relatively free hand. It also allows them to deal with international problems in a manner that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. Western powers enjoy a new freedom to trample over the aspirations of people throughout the world. The massive invasion of the Gulf by imperialist forces would have been out of the question five or six years ago. The South African regime would not have felt able to try neutralising the ANC through cooptation as recently as three or four years back. From the collapse of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua to the slow strangulation of Vietnam, the Western powers can boast a solid record of recent achievements. The corollary of the marginalisation of the working class is the global erosion of the dynamism of the struggle against imperialism.

### Long and short of it

The present conjuncture, which is experienced as a dramatic shift in the balance of power in favour of the imperialists, is the product of the convergence of important long-term developments with emerging short-term trends. The most important long-term influence is the cumulative effect of the defeats suffered by the working class internationally since the mid-1920s. As a result, all of the achievements of revolutionary Marxism have been slowly but decisively compromised through the defeats and negative experiences associated with Stalinism during the past seven decades. The working class has been politically incapacitated for some time, but it took the recent disintegration of Stalinism to reveal just how far the rot had gone. The wear and tear of past defeats has meant that, when Stalinism and Labourism were exposed as non-alternatives, the working class movement disintegrated swiftly.

This disintegration is the final act in a drama that began a long time ago. But for all that, the very suddenness of the dénouement has surprised, even shocked, many people. The disintegration of the working class movement expressed itself politically in the decline of traditional left-wing ideas and policies. For the establishment the collapse of its traditional adversary has come as a welcome relief. In a sense the late eighties were the first and probably the only period this century when the ruling class felt relatively relaxed about the so-called 'red menace'.

### Stagnant system

The consummation of the long-term trend towards the disintegration of the working class also coincides with some important new developments. First, the acceleration of the global trend towards economic stagnation. Second, there is now a new burst of imperialist rivalries and expansion. And third there is the beginning of a new process of redividing the world among the capitalist powers, which increasingly takes on the form of recolonising the third world.

In the past, a recession in the West followed by a wave of imperialist gunboat diplomacy would have led to an outburst of anti-capitalist struggles. But in today's environment it is unlikely that this scenario will hold. The distinguishing feature of the present conjuncture is that the capitalist crisis coincides with the emergence of a depoliticised working class; this coincidence works to strengthen reactionary trends. Such a state of affairs cannot last for long. But for now the crisis of capitalism is likely to encourage reaction rather than the radicalisation of the masses.

### Old avenues closed

The unprecedented coincidence of current events leads to the sober assessment of the moment contained in 'Midnight in the Century'. Today, all the old avenues are closed. Even in the darkest days of fascism in the thirties many believed that eventually a new society would emerge as an expression of human progress. Today we don't suffer from the brutalities of fascism. Yet ironically there is less hope invested in the prospect of change than ever before. The vision of transforming society through the collective struggle of the working class no longer inspires support beyond the confines of isolated groups of Marxists. Not surprisingly, this crisis of left-wing politics has enormously boosted the confidence of the right.

Once we understand the

coincidence of forces which produces the 'Midnight in the Century' effect we are forced to adopt a perspective which recognises uncomfortable realities. Thus we agree with our critics that workers will strike in Eastern Europe as the harsh realities of the capitalist market hit home, but we interpret the meaning of such action quite differently. Workers in Eastern Europe who strike against their deteriorating living conditions will not draw the conclusion that capitalism is a problem and that they need a left-wing alternative. They will draw the conclusion that the situation is even worse than they expected, which only proves that Stalinism must have been even more rotten than they originally suspected. Contrary to the expectations of space-cadet Trotskyism, the working class in Eastern Europe is likely to shift to the right rather than to the left when confronted with the degrading consequences of the impact of the market.

### What's left

The problems of working class politics are reinforced by the absence of coherent left-wing ideas. Organisations and individuals who are subjectively left-wing are so thoroughly confused that they no longer know what they stand for. In terms of thought it is difficult to distinguish between the left and right-wing intelligentsia. Many of the ideas usually associated with the right in the nineteenth century—fear of progress, of science, of modernity and of collective action—are today closely linked with the outlook of left-wing thinkers. Friedrich Nietzsche, the favourite philosopher of the right at the turn of the century, is now extremely fashionable among the left-wing and liberal intelligentsia.

This is not just a change in taste; it is testimony to the fact that in many respects the distinction between left and right has lost its meaning. In this topsy-turvy world the so-called right-wing thinker is often more progressive than his left-wing counterpart. At least some of them are trying—albeit unsuccessfully—to uphold a semblance of rationality and to promote universal values. It is among the left-wing intelligentsia that the greatest scorn is reserved for the ideas of progress associated with the Enlightenment. Thus it is not simply the *possibility* but also the *desirability* of social change that is now being questioned by the left/liberal intelligentsia. The left's intellectual collapse further underlines the ideological crisis of the working class movement.

In the current disjuncture it is not enough for Marxists simply to hold



the fort or carry the flame and wait for the return of better times. Once we recognise the scale of the problem facing humanity it becomes incumbent upon Marxists to rethink and rework their strategy. Political activity and involvement in all forms of social struggle are important. But such struggles are of limited potential in the context of the present wasteland of ideas. It would also be wrong to counterpose thought to action, for the act of thinking on its own produces meagre results. The priority for us is singlemindedly to rethink Marxist politics through learning from the experience of struggle and of humanity as a whole.

Critical and scientific social thought lags behind the unfolding reality. Left-wing ideas risk becoming as banal as their right-wing counterparts. To advance further requires an appropriation of contemporary experience. The first series of questions that needs to be tackled relates to the quality of the stability that the capitalist system enjoys as a result of the historic setbacks suffered by the working class. The second series of problems concerns the manner in which the working class can reconstitute itself

as a political force in this period of reaction. Finally, it is necessary to consider how far the shift in the balance of class power has helped the capitalist system to reorganise itself on a more lasting basis.

It has never been possible to dismiss out of hand the possibility of the successful reorganisation of the capitalist system. Thus the founding document of the Revolutionary Communist Party cited Leon Trotsky's comments on the issue. As early as 1921, in the midst of an era of revolution, Trotsky had conceded the possibility of a new phase of capitalist expansion, though he considered this entirely improbable:

'Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of general capitalist progress in the most powerful, leading and ruling countries is not to be excluded. But for this capitalism would first have to overcome enormous barriers of a class as well as an interstate character. It would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the socialist republic and so forth. We are still a long way from all this. Theoretical possibilities

correspond least of all to political possibilities.' (*The Third International After Lenin*, quoted in 'Our tasks and methods', Revolutionary Communist Reprints, August 1979)

In substance all the 'theoretical possibilities' outlined by Trotsky have been realised. So what conclusion are we to draw about the standing of capitalism today?

It is easy to speculate and follow the lazy course of stating that capitalism has become this or that. The either/or approach, of announcing that capitalism is exactly the same, or that it has qualitatively changed, comes readily to mechanistic thinkers. It is far more difficult to evolve an analysis that captures in thought the real relations of capitalism today as they unfold on the basis of previous ones. This dialectical study of the evolution of the imperialist system is the task that *Living Marxism* must take on, to contribute to the resolution of the problems posed by 'Midnight in the Century'. It is a subject to which I will return in the months ahead.



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# IMPERIALISM



# Opening up the debate

*Living Marxism* wants to encourage the widest possible debate around the ideas contained in 'Midnight in the Century'. To that end, we welcome critical contributions from organisations and individuals.

## Stalinism and the crisis of leadership

Geoff Pilling, editor of *The International*, airs some differences with our analysis

**F**ranks Richards' 'Midnight in the Century' (December 1990) raises important questions not only for the Revolutionary Communist Party but for the working class as a whole. The article was a response to what it terms the 'dramatic changes' in the whole world political situation over the last year and more. No one will deny that there have indeed been dramatic political changes over this period: the issue is how we analyse them and what conclusions we draw from them about the struggle for socialism.

At one point Frank Richards contends: 'For the first time this century there is no real sense of a working class movement with a distinctive political identity anywhere in the world. The collapse of Stalinism in the East, and the defeats of Labourism and its variants in the West, have seen to that.'

The implications of this statement must be considered carefully because they go to the very heart of the entire article and the conclusions that arise from it: that the working class is a spent force, that we face conditions even worse than following the defeat of the working class at the hands of fascism in the 1930s.

Frank Richards contends that the *collapse* of Stalinism has robbed the working class of its political identity. He makes the same point elsewhere: 'This defeat [of the working class] was consolidated through the political and ideological and ultimately moral collapse of what was publicly considered to be the left.'

But is not the very *opposite* the case? Stalinism and reformism ('the left') have always been understood by Marxists as the agencies of imperialism inside the working class movement. It is the domination of these leaderships in the working class internationally that has alone prevented the working class from achieving a consciousness of its historical interests as a class. In that respect, far from holding up our hands in despair, we should surely unreservedly welcome the crisis that is now engulfing Stalinism throughout the world as creating the conditions that provide an unprecedented opportunity for the building of revolutionary leadership.

The fact is that for decades the Communist parties of the world claimed to be heirs of the Russian Revolution. This was an utterly false claim but it undoubtedly did give them false prestige in the eyes of many of even the most advanced workers throughout the world. Even in Britain, where the Communist Party has always been relatively small, the most active workers in the trades unions tended to organise around the party. And the ideological influence of the Communist

parties was by no means limited to those it organised directly: how many times have we heard Benn and other lefts in the Labour Party waxing eloquently about the so-called 'socialist countries' of Eastern Europe and China. Despite the doubts that many influenced by the Communist Party may have had about the policies and activities of the party, it was the existence of what they regarded as 'the socialist sixth of the world' that kept them in the orbit of that party and walled them off from those fighting against Stalinism in the working class movement.

### A monstrous creation

This mixture of deliberately fostered illusions and downright lies has now been shattered. The Soviet Union has been increasingly revealed as a society having nothing to do with socialism but as a monstrous creation of the Stalinist bureaucracy. At the same time, far from claiming to represent the history of October, Gorbachev and company are busy doing everything to distance themselves from the Russian Revolution: indeed the Stalinist bureaucracy is more and more openly seen as the principal conduit for the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Thus the fundamental issue is not whether some people in the working class movement have reacted in a pessimistic manner to the disintegration of Stalinism while others remain blindly optimistic. The question is one of how we *understand* Stalinism and its role in the class struggle. It is on this basic political and theoretical question that I find myself in disagreement with Frank Richards.

For example, he speaks of the long post-war boom that characterised the period after 1945. He says that it was in this long boom that the 'hegemony' of the capitalist order was consolidated. Naturally there can be genuine differences amongst Marxists about our interpretation of the 'economic' character of this boom: was it sustained by arms spending, by other forms of state spending, by a 'technological revolution', etc? But the most fundamental matter of all is that this boom would have been impossible without the 'post-war settlement' arrived at between the Stalinist bureaucracy and imperialism as the war drew to a close. In return for agreement about the territorial division of Europe, the Stalinist bureaucracy used its considerable prestige to destroy the wave of revolutionary struggles (Greece, Italy, France) that occurred at the end of the imperialist war.

Without the ability of the Stalinist bureaucracy

to impose defeats on this movement there would have been *no* basis for this post-war boom. Here again, I believe, is a fundamental question of Marxist theory. Do we still live in the epoch of what Lenin, Trotsky and others characterised as the epoch of imperialism? For them this was the epoch in which there could no longer be an all-round, general, development of the productive forces. On the contrary, imperialism was marked by just the opposite tendency: one in which the productive forces stagnated and even regressed. If capitalism survived it did so *exclusively* (not 'mainly' or 'predominately' but *exclusively*) because the crisis of the revolutionary leadership remained as yet unresolved. And further, this crisis of leadership had as its essence the betrayals of the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy. Does Frank Richards share such a conception?

### Historically imprisoned

Unless the central characteristic of our epoch is understood in *this* way we must, I believe, accept the view that because of some new-found inner strength and resources, imperialism remains still capable of developing the productive forces. And given that Marxists hold that social revolution can occur only in epochs when the productive forces find themselves historically imprisoned within the existing social relations, we would have to renounce the prospects for socialism; or at any rate socialism would be a pure utopia, without scientific foundation. We would consequently be obliged to limit our politics to ones of protest, defending the working class on this and that issue as the situation demanded but renouncing completely the prospect of building a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

I am not saying that Frank Richards holds this view explicitly. But I do suggest that this is implied in his underlying conceptions of Stalinism and the nature of the imperialist epoch and it is on these issues that I believe we should concentrate the discussion arising from his contribution.

What about a forum on these questions?

Geoff Pilling is a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party/Workers Press. A much longer 'Open letter' from the WRP to the Revolutionary Communist Party about issues flowing from Frank Richards' article appears in the current issue of *The International*.



# Pay cuts and 'company culture'

These days, Thomas Cook employees are encouraged to think of themselves as travel consultants empowered by company culture, rather than workers exploited by capitalists. Yet they have been told by management to take an old-fashioned wage cut or risk losing their jobs.

Andrew Calcutt reports

**S**tella's personalised business cards describe her as a 'travel consultant'. She sits in front of a visual display unit mounted on a stripped-pine workstation in a recently refurbished retail outlet in central London. Her pay is performance-related and her performance is as smart as her uniform. Stella looks and sounds like a citizen of the new information age, far removed from the bad old days of sweatshop capitalism. But recent events at the traditional British firm of Thomas Cook & Sons, travel agents and foreign exchange dealers, have reminded her that 'although I have a tray of business cards, I'm still just an employee'.

In mid-February Thomas Cook asked all of its 7600 employees in Britain to accept 'temporary reductions from their pay'. Staff on the lowest grade will lose one per cent of their salary (£3 a month). A branch manager could be £27 a month lighter in the pay packet. Inflation means that the real cuts in spending power will be far worse. Cook's says company directors will lose 10 per cent, but head office refuses to divulge their salaries, either before or after the 'temporary reduction'. The pay cut is part of a package of measures designed to reduce Cook's wages bill by £12m. Cook's management and the union, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA), both claim that the package of pay cuts, early

retirement and voluntary redundancy will save 250 jobs which would otherwise have been lost through compulsory redundancy.

When it was announced, the pay cut at Cook's was described as the first of its kind since the aftermath of the General Strike in 1926. By the end of February, however, at least 10 firms had implemented similar measures. Sir John Banham, director general of the Confederation of British Industry, welcomed the trend and urged more firms to join in: 'It is in everybody's interests to accept lower settlements and in some cases...temporary freezes. The evidence suggests that more and more companies are recognising this.' As the pressures of recession encourage managers to impose wage cuts and/or job losses, 'temporary' measures like the Thomas Cook package could become the thin end of the wedge.

## Price war

Last year more than 500 British travel agents went bust—double the 1989 total. Since August 1990, the big names in travel (Cook's, Lunn Poly, Pickford's) have been engaged in a price war. The Gulf crisis added to the decline in holiday traffic. The war may be over but the travel slump looks set to continue, as indicated by Cook's desperate advertising gimmick of offering free holidays to Gulf veterans.

Thomas Cook & Sons is as old

as the British Empire. A century ago, travellers in cricket whites and pith helmets referred to the River Nile as 'Cook's Canal'. In recent years, Cook's cornered 12 per cent of the package holiday market. But over the past few months the profits have dried up. 'Companies like ourselves', said a spokesman for Cook's, 'cannot afford to operate at a loss'. By the end of January, he explained, 'we had two options—either 250 compulsory redundancies, or the package of voluntary measures which we were able to announce'.

Senior managers at Cook's Peterborough HQ stress the 'voluntary' nature of the package. 'If the staff had said the pay cut was not acceptable it would not have been introduced', said a spokesman. Cook's are also encouraging staff to volunteer for unpaid leave, or to downgrade themselves (and their wages) from full time to part time. A spokesman said: 'We wanted to create a situation where people could feel free to come to us and say "I'd like to go away for three months". We want people to feel free to come forward and say if they would prefer to work part time rather than full time.'

Cook's have even claimed that it was the workforce who 'felt free' to suggest a pay cut: 'Company culture involves an open style of communications. We encourage networking out and syndicated group sessions, where staff are given





There's pounds off everything at Thomas Cook's this year—including the staff's pay slips

company projections and asked to come up with solutions to business problems. The idea of a pay cut was suggested at one such meeting with retail staff.'

'Empowerment' of employees is the buzz-word at head office. 'Company culture' is designed to give the impression that everyone has a stake in decision-making. But market forces and management's drive to maximise profits still rule the lives of Cook's employees. If the 'voluntary' pay cut had been rejected, the company 'would have had to consider compulsory redundancies'. Management reserves the right 'to protect key areas of our business'—by deciding who will and will not be allowed to volunteer for redundancy, retirement or unpaid leave. Cook's is unable to guarantee that compulsory redundancies will not be required in the future, since 'we are not yet in a position to evaluate how successful the measures have been in terms of cutting costs'. So if the pay cuts aren't deep enough, jobs will still have to go. Behind the new age jargon of travel consultants, empowerment and voluntary measures, Thomas Cook employees are undergoing a familiar working

class experience of being coerced by their bosses.

Cook's employees do not conform to the traditional caricature of the British working class. Their jackets are more likely to be Naf Naf than donkey. But they are fairly typical of the new working class which has developed, especially in the service industries of south-east England, over the past 15 years. Nearly three quarters of Cook's staff are women. More than 75 per cent are under 36. A third are under 24. Far more than steelworkers or even carworkers, they are characteristic of the British working class in the nineties.

If Cook's workers are typical, the new working class is not taken in by 'company culture'. 'Nobody believes in empowerment', said one employee at a Cook's bureau de change in London: 'I think if we kicked up a fuss about the measures it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference.' The staff are certainly not the willing salary-sacrificers depicted by management. But nor is there a sense that they could resist management's demands. Instead the prevailing mood is one of unwilling acceptance of what seems inevitable.

A Cook's travel consultant in the

City summed up the way many felt: 'Of course we're not happy, but business is low, so....' She shrugged her shoulders. Others balanced their resentment against the pay cut with relief that compulsory redundancies have not yet been introduced. 'We're not happy about it', said one, 'but it could have been worse. Business is so poor it could have been a higher percentage cut or job losses. We'll have to take it as it comes'. Another expressed the view that 'we [the company] are losing money, so we [the workers] would rather lose a small amount of pay than risk loss of jobs. Most of us are resigned to it'.

Nobody is looking to the union to fight the pay cut. 'Recognising the serious economic situation and the desire to achieve savings by voluntary means', the TSSA gave 'qualified support' to the management package. The union has 'had a good relationship with Thomas Cook since 1945', and union officers are satisfied that, by consulting the TSSA about the cuts, the company showed it was 'anxious for things to be dealt with properly'. In any case, less than 1500 Cook's workers are in the union. In the one office which took steps to oppose the package, there were no union members. The majority of Cook's workers are indifferent to a company union which seems irrelevant to their concerns.

The Cook's story offers an insight into relations between the classes in Britain today. The impact of the recession has prompted management to take measures which confirm that, despite all the 'empowerment' PR, the relationship between employer and employee remains as coercive and exploitative as ever. The major difference today is in the way that these things are perceived.

Cook's travel consultants do not identify themselves as a collective group in a conflictual relationship with management. Even those who are angry about the pay cuts can see no alternative to the capitalist common sense of management's argument. The employee quoted above, who talked about the problems of 'we' the company and 'we' the workforce in the same sentence, showed the confusion prevalent in many workers' attitudes. They are not enthusiastic about company culture. But while the workforce's only voice comes from the TSSA, a useless outfit which acts as an extension of the personnel department, firms like Thomas Cook are likely to have considerable scope for pushing through cuts in pay and jobs.



Slump starts bitter debate

# Tories turn on their 'miracle'

The poll tax isn't the only Thatcherite policy which has fallen from grace. Helen Simons on how top Tories are now blaming yesterday's heroes for today's economic crisis

In February a stark warning of impending economic calamity was issued to the Major government. In a letter to the *Times*, six of Britain's leading economists argued that failure to slash interest rates immediately would lead to a slump to rival 'the Great Depression of the 1930s'.

You might think that such an attack was only to be expected in the month when even the official statisticians had to concede that Britain was in recession. After all, during the last recession in the early eighties, the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher and her chancellor Geoffrey Howe were denounced in a celebrated letter to the press from no less than 364 leading economists. Six disgruntled analysts seem pretty minor by comparison.

## From the heart

However, the debate is different and the problems more serious this time. Today's leading critics of the government are not opposition politicians, *Guardian* columnists or Keynesian economists. They come from the heart of the Tory establishment. The signatories to the *Times* letter were six Thatcherite loyalists: Sir Alan Walters, Thatcher's personal economic adviser; Professor Patrick Minford, one of the Thatcher government's few supporters among academic economists; and four of the government's top supporters in the City over the last decade.

Nor are Walters and his friends alone. Their call for a U-turn on the economy is backed by a sizeable number of Tory MPs and supporters. The most vigorous opposition to government policy comes not from the old Tory wets, who have often balked at economic difficulties, but

from Thatcherite hardliners like Nicholas Ridley. Many of them are now criticising the very same hardline policies which they have championed for a decade. They are asking the government to aid industry by radically lowering interest rates; some favour tax cuts or investment incentives.

There is a palpable sense of a collective loss of nerve in the Tory Party. Just how far the Thatcherites have gone in abandoning the past is revealed by the way in which they are turning on the heroes of the eighties. Nigel Lawson, the golden chancellor who was supposed to be the architect of their economic 'miracle', is now widely abused in Tory circles as the cause of their crisis.

## Tory implosion

The *Times* letter was only a small public expression of a bitter squabble within Tory ranks. The euphoria over the Gulf War and the flurry of activity on the financial markets which followed it could not hide the government's underlying problems, nor cover up the cracks in Conservative ranks for long. Despite the party's revival in the polls under John Major, the rancour and division that ended Thatcher's rule have not disappeared. The debate on the economy is evidence of the Tory Party turning in on itself once more in a bitter squabble.

On the surface, the row seems to be about different strategies for managing the recession. Walters and his supporters point to record bankruptcies, rising unemployment, collapsing sales at home and abroad and crippling levels of corporate debt. Against this background, they argue, the government's policy of maintaining high interest rates and a fixed (and high) exchange rate for the pound will lead to a major slump

despite falling inflation. They suggest a big cut in interest rates, to put credit in the hands of producers and consumers and so boost demand and investment, and a devaluation of sterling to make exports more competitive.

To many of Britain's deeply indebted mortgage-payers and company directors, Walters' proposals must appear to have a lot going for them. Yet the government seems determined to follow its course of squeezing the economy through maintaining relatively high interest rates and keeping a tight rein on credit. Why?

Major and his team offer various technical arguments against their critics. They say, for example, that high interest rates are necessary because the fight against inflation has not yet been won; that the current international value of sterling is in fact below the average of the past decade; and that to devalue sterling so soon after British entry into the exchange rate mechanism (ERM) would cause serious problems in Europe. Behind all the complex discussions about the ERM, interest rates and inflation, however, there is a much more basic reason why the government has proved so reluctant to alter its economic stance. Major's famous motto that, 'if it isn't hurting it isn't working', coined during his days as chancellor, holds the key to understanding his government's policies.

## Making us pay

The Major government is faced with the reality that there is no quick-fix solution for the British economy. The credit boom of the late eighties did not alter the fact that British capitalism lags far behind its main rivals, unable to match the productivity of American, Japanese,



German or even French capital. The technological backwardness of British industry has been brought about by generations of low investment. Another short spurt of credit as proposed by Walters would do nothing to resolve this problem. As the eighties proved, even if there are a few billions available to be borrowed, profit-conscious capitalists will not use them to invest in uncompetitive British industry.

Major's approach will do little about the low level of technology in British industry, but he hopes to improve the profits from British labour another way. His 'strategy' is simply to let the recession do its work of driving down our wage levels. A massive shake-out of jobs will create the conditions in which workers' living standards can be attacked. Encouraging employers to screw down on wages is a major factor behind government intransigence over interest rates. With inflation being reduced by the impact of the recession, the half-percentage point cuts in interest rates introduced in

February represented no real change in government policy. Chancellor Norman Lamont and Major remain determined to keep a tight grip on the economy to ensure the recession bites effectively.

Major is loath to abandon his approach to hammering living standards when there are signs of success. While the headline rate of wage settlements is keeping pace with inflation, wage settlements in manufacturing are beginning to fall. In February the average manufacturing pay deal was 8.3 per cent—less than the rate of inflation. Elsewhere some workers, like 7500 Thomas Cook employees, are even taking a cash wage cut (see report on pages 34 and 35).

The Major strategy of sitting out the recession and hoping it will cure Britain's ills differs little from that pursued by Thatcher and Howe during the last recession. The other policies being canvassed—lowering interest rates, devaluing sterling—are equally tired ideas which have failed to revive British capitalism in the

past. Neither side of the Tory debate has anything new to offer. The row has become public and generated a lot of heat, not because it is a clash of powerful intellectual alternatives, but as a symptom of a broader Tory crisis.

The recession of the nineties has exacerbated tensions within the Tory establishment because, far more than the last time around, their own constituency has been hit. Ten years ago, when the worst consequences of the crisis were concentrated in traditional industrial strongholds to the north, the Tory government and its core supporters could unite to blame 'union power' and the last Labour administration for the wave of plant closures and mass unemployment. Today, however, the surge in unemployment has also hit the Tory heartlands further south, putting bankers, estate agents and other children of the Thatcher revolution on the dole. Rising discontent among the middle classes has helped to stir up the infighting within Tory ranks.

Compared to the last recession, many Tories are far less confident of any solution to the current crisis. At the start of the eighties they could happily kid themselves that a 'leaner and fitter' Britain could once again become a world competitor. Ten years on, after getting leaner but no fitter, Britain is on the brink of another economic nightmare and the rhetoric is less convincing.

The relaxed image which Major has been able to present so far is a reflection of how ineffective the opposition has been in exploiting the recession, rather than of any genuine confidence on the government's part. The underlying insecurities among Tories can be seen in the way that they are blaming yesterday's heroes for today's crisis. First to be slaughtered was Lawson, once the darling of the party with his 'popular' capitalist economic 'miracle', now depicted as a pathetic chancellor who was too loose with the money supply. Next to go was the ERM, which in six months has been transformed from the panacea for Britain's problems to the cause of the same. Now Major himself—prodigy of the Thatcherite right—is being criticised by some of the same MPs who elected him last November.

The great debate on the economy is not really a debate at all, since neither side has a coherent idea to offer. It is better seen as an acrimonious bout of Tory mud-slinging, an attempt by everybody involved to blame somebody else for the crisis.

Now 'Lucky' Lawson is in the doghouse



PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



April 1916 - the Easter Rising



PHOTO: George Morrison

# Connolly under fire again

Seventy-five years after he was executed by the British Crown, James Connolly is in danger of being buried by the Irish left. Eve Anderson stands up for the Easter Rising

**S**eventy-five years ago this month, James Connolly and an assorted group of armed revolutionaries and nationalists marched down to the General Post Office in the centre of Dublin to declare Irish independence. After a week of fighting, their uprising was crushed by the British forces of occupation and Connolly and the other leaders were executed.

Two years before his death, when the partition of Ireland was first mooted, Connolly warned that such a measure would deny the Irish people genuine freedom and lead to a carnival of reaction, north and south.

He was proved all too right when the British drew an artificial border across the island at the end of the War of Independence in 1921, creating the sectarian statelet of Northern Ireland on one side and the stillborn, still-dominated Free State on the other. Yet today, Dublin politicians who claim to be Connolly's heirs have begun openly to endorse partition and to criticise his attempt to create a united, independent Ireland.

In November 1990 Mary Robinson, a supporter of the Irish Labour Party which claims to stand in the Connolly tradition, was elected

president of Southern Ireland. The election of a Labour woman was hailed by the left as an astonishing breakthrough, a victory for her relatively enlightened views on women's rights and homosexuality in a country still strongly influenced by Catholic morality. The most significant thing about Robinson, however, is that she represents the new mood of overt anti-republicanism in Southern Irish politics. She is well-known for her opposition to the struggle for Irish unity, and her British-style condemnations of the 'Irish terrorism' of the IRA. In her inaugural speech



### Connolly's Irish Citizen Army parades in Dublin

as president, Robinson talked of a new dawn in Irish politics, folding away the 'faded flags' of the Civil War.

A month after the elections another organisation which likes to bandy Connolly's name about, the Workers Party (descendants of the old Official IRA), tabled a motion in the Irish parliament, the Dail, to change the constitution and drop the 70-year old claim to the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. The supporters of this reform argued for an 'historic compromise between nationalism and Unionism' as the key to progress in Ireland.

Robinson's victory and the Workers Party initiative are part of a wider debate now raging over the question of nationhood and the legitimacy of Irish nationalism. At the heart of the debate is the problem of what constitutes the Irish nation. If that nation is made up of the Twenty-six Counties of Southern Ireland, then the quest for nationhood is resolved, since that entity has been operating as a distinct political unit since the partition of 1921. Consequently, Irish politicians and people alike can busy themselves with other issues and forget about the North. This view—the traditional outlook of Unionists and British imperialists—is today embraced by Robinson, the Irish Labour Party and the Workers Party, and shared by many Irish academics. They are now rewriting Irish history to suit the modern orthodoxy, which seeks to legitimise the Twenty-six County state, normalise the Border, and criminalise those fighting for its abolition.

However, if the Irish nation is made up of all 32 counties, then the quest for nationhood is unresolved, since the nation is partitioned and its Northern section still a colonial outpost of the British state. In which case, the struggle for self-determination being waged in the North is not only valid, but a priority for all of the Irish people.

The story of James Connolly and the Easter Rising plays a central part in this debate. While the Dublin authorities revere his memory by naming schools, hospitals and roads after him, they are trying to obliterate the political tradition which he represented and to deprioritise the national question. The greater irony is that the Irish left, who claim Connolly's revolutionary mantle, are also seeking to discredit his goal of liberating Ireland, by attacking his participation in the Rising.

The Rising was a tiny insurrection in Dublin over Easter week of 1916. It involved a coalition of forces. Representing the interests of the Irish working class was Connolly and the

Irish Citizen Army, a workers' militia formed around the 1913 Dublin lock-out. Representing the interests of the Irish middle class was the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a clandestine, underground organisation which believed that 'physical force' methods were necessary to rid Ireland of British domination. But while the IRB was anti-colonialist, it was also pro-capitalist. Its stated aims talked of political freedom from British rule but made no mention of social emancipation from exploitation.

The IRB had infiltrated the leadership of a moderate nationalist movement, the Irish Volunteers, and secretly planned to use its 10 000 members as a stage army for the Rising. This backfired when the plans were discovered by Eoin MacNeill, who thought moderation and respectability were the way forward. He countermanded the orders for military exercises during Easter week. The Rising went ahead, but only a few thousand participated. Outside Dublin, only Galway made a significant attempt to fight.

Within Dublin the street fighting lasted a week. Life in much of the city carried on as normal, and people failed to rally around the Rising. The IRB had gambled on bamboozling the Irish Volunteers into a fight for national freedom, but the gamble failed. Connolly had gambled that the Rising would ignite the spirit of freedom and resistance in the minds of Irish workers. With the First World War raging in Europe, he reasoned that the Empire would be militarily overstretched, and that the social tensions unleashed by the war would make Ireland ripe for revolution.

### Early Rising

But the Rising was premature. Only after the colonial authorities had captured and killed Connolly and the other leaders did the Irish people rally to their cause. A new cycle of resistance was generated. In less than three years, Ireland was embroiled in a full-scale War of Independence and the Irish Volunteers had become the Irish Republican Army.

Today Connolly's role in the Rising is hotly contested. Many on the Irish left accuse him of 'lowering the red flag to the green', putting middle class nationalism before class struggle. This criticism turns reality on its head. If he had ignored the question of national self-determination it would not have gone away. It would have merely handed the initiative to middle class republicans like the IRB leaders and allowed them to dictate the national

agenda. This indeed was what happened after the defeat of the Rising; the eventual result was the acceptance of the partition settlement on terms laid down by the British Empire.

Connolly's aim was to put a working class stamp on all the important political issues of the day—and none was more important than the oppression of Ireland by British imperialism. Unlike his critics, he understood that the working class had to fight for both political and economic freedom. There could be no hope of progress in Ireland while it remained under British domination. Thus he was prepared to form a tactical alliance with the IRB to fight for Irish freedom. But he never abandoned the cause of social emancipation. Addressing his supporters a few days before the Rising, he gave a famous demonstration of the link between the class struggle in Ireland and the national question: 'In the event of victory, hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached. We are out for economic as well as political liberty.'

### Nothing new

Today both left and right claim Connolly as a founding figure, yet both are embarrassed by his role in the Rising and his condemnation of partition. They have all reduced the national question to the issue of discrimination against Catholics in the North, and try to avoid the thorny problem of the Border and British imperialism. This left-right consensus means that the struggle for Irish self-determination now exercises less influence over Southern politics than at any time since partition.

Much has changed in Ireland since 1916, but one thing remains true: ignoring the national question will not make it go away. President Mary Robinson may want to bury James Connolly, but her hopes for a new dawn in Ireland are premature. The pro-partitionist stand which she represents, far from marking a fresh beginning in Irish politics, is as stale and dull as the sordid history of British rule in Ireland itself. There is nothing new or profound in the perpetuation of oppression. Whatever Robinson and the Workers Party might say, so long as partition remains intact Britain will dominate Irish affairs, and the entire nation will suffer the consequences. Connolly's Rising may have failed. But at least it pointed out the path to real freedom.



**living**





A lot of purists will be disturbed by the indecent way in which the souvenir industry is cashing in on the memory of a great man. It doesn't bother me much. Any move to displace the Queen and her ugly brood from the souvenir stands can only be welcome. If we are going to have hero worship, then let's at least have decent heroes.

As for the record industry, the bicentenary is welcome relief. With sales plummeting and few inspiring performers on the scene, Mozart is an opportunity to shift stock and rake in the lucre. Pavarotti's success with 'Nessun dorma' during the World Cup was a good precedent for the companies, and convinced some that the punters are not the ignorant dross they always considered them to be. Just to be on the safe side, the industry has repackaged Mozart as a bit of a punk who could turn out a ripping old tune. The main problem so far is that there is not a lot in the Mozart oeuvre which can be crammed into a three-minute slot on *Top of the Pops*. No doubt Nigel

Kennedy is working overtime to fill this gap in the market.

Beyond the music industry, the bicentenary has spawned some discussion on the nature of genius. In August, the British Museum is hosting an exhibition on Mozart, titled 'Prodigy of Nature', implying that Mozart's brilliance was a gift of nature. There is obviously something special about an individual who at the age of five was performing around Europe, and who by the age of 12, when he wrote his first opera, already had a substantial body of composition under his belt.

Mozart's work is so unquestionably perfect that it seems commonplace to assert his near divinity. As Mozart's rival Antonio Salieri remarks in the film *Amadeus*: 'Here was the voice of God speaking through this little man.' The divine quality is emphasised by his short life (35 years), during which he produced more than 600 pieces of music, ranging from occasional *divertimenti* to the great operas.

The ease with which he wrote such perfectly crafted music gives credence to the idea that he must have been a medium for a higher power.

On a more secular level, there are two interpretations of Mozart which will get a good airing this year. The more traditional one, associated with the musical intelligentsia, is of Mozart as superman who stands above the common herd of humanity, and whose genius is emphasised by his distance from the crowd. The snobbery of this view makes it fairly unpalatable to most people. In recent years it has lost ground to the more popular view of Mozart as the original punk.

This trend has gained from the crisis in the music industry. The dwindling interest in popular music has forced the record companies to look to other sources of income. The violinist Nigel Kennedy is one victim of this new fad, being forced to wear a spiked haircut, develop a proletarian accent and declare endlessly his support for Aston Villa. *Amadeus* plugged this line, too, with its portrayal of Mozart as a hell-raiser. The posters adorning the London Underground advertising the Barbican concerts show a figure in Mozartian dress at a bus stop carrying a ghetto-blaster. The idea that Mozart and punk are similar because of their youthful rebelliousness must be one of the great banalities of our time.

## 1991 is the bicentenary of the death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mark Reilly searches for the source of his genius

Mozart

# All in the genes?

### The lone arranger?

These very different interpretations of Mozart share a common assessment of genius. Genius is seen as something purely individual, residing in the character's psychological make-up or genes. Either way, it is seen as having little to do with the character of the age. Both views take Mozart out of his historical context and reduce him to a timeless prodigy whose equal may, with a bit of luck, appear at some time in the future.

The lone genius has always been a favourite figure for the establishment. The existence of great men like Mozart is used as proof that as long as individuality is allowed to flourish, the odd genius will have the space to come through and show his worth. However, the establishment has felt a bit sheepish on this subject for a long time, since there are so few geniuses around. The absence of genius is usually blamed on state interference in society, which apparently suppresses individuality and stifles initiative.

Mozart was undoubtedly a genius, one of the greatest of all time. But his genius came not from something just within himself, whether that something is cast as the deity, his brain, or youthful rebelliousness. His genius lay not in the fact that he rose above or stood outside his age, but that he appropriated the spirit of that age so thoroughly and reproduced it in such a sublime musical form.

Mozart was a composer of the Enlightenment, that period of the late eighteenth century when the ideas which dominated the next 200 years first set into a coherent body of thought. For the first time in history the idea took hold that man could rise above the squalor of everyday life and change society. Philosophers, scientists and men of letters sought to discover universally applicable laws of thought and nature which would guide men's actions. It was this discovery of universality—that what applied to one person would apply equally to another, and that the human condition could be changed accordingly—which opened up to many the possibility of human perfectibility.



Mozart's music is suffused with the spirit of perfectibility. At the end of act one of *The Magic Flute*, composed the year after the French Revolution, the chorus in Sarastro's Temple sing of man 'godlike for eternity'. The seeming perfection of Mozart's music was due to his ability to use the classical form in a unique way, and develop it to its extreme limits.

Classicism reached its height at the end of the eighteenth century. On one level the genre was a help to a composer in that it gave him a set form in which to operate. However, the very rigidity of the form and the strict rules of composition also acted as a barrier to creativity. The given structure of a piece of music forced the composer to conform to a preordained logic and become almost an interpreter of form. It severely restricted the scope for innovation.

Christopher Kollman, an influential musical theorist writing at the time, tried to develop music into a science by defining the rules it must obey for its proper execution: 'The whole periodical order in a composition serves to create a certain expectation at the setting out, and a satisfaction at the ending of a piece or section.' In other words, a composer's worth was measured by how well he executed a pre-defined logic. (See *Essay on Harmony*, 1796)

### Peculiar turbulence

What set Mozart apart from his contemporaries was the way he operated within this rigid structure and yet infused his music with a subjective element. The comparison with his contemporary Joseph Haydn illustrates the point. Haydn was the pure classicist who wrote to the strictest rules. His attraction lies in the perfection with which he turns in what you expect, but there is always something remote about him. Mozart, however, constantly surprises with the way he departs from what is expected, yet never breaks the structure.

The subjective and unpredictable element in Mozart prefigures many of the developments in the music of the nineteenth century. Perhaps that is where his true genius lies. While the best of his contemporaries were developing the existing forms, Mozart could discern the first glimmers of the next century and its peculiar turbulence. The uncertainty and foreboding which came in the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is present, especially in his later work. In his great opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), all the characters confront their feelings as hostile forces over which they have little control. Maybe this account of human experience, where nothing is what it appears to be, is the more accurate account of life in a society torn by conflict. It is more approachable and true than the lofty remoteness of classicism.

Mozart was a genius who could translate the grandeur and ideals of his times into music and yet hint at the dark secrets of the future. But without the intellectual and cultural summits which society had reached, there would have been little hope of Mozart making the impact which he did. Genius does not come like a lucky hand in a game of poker, let alone the will of a deity. It flourishes when men and women try to master society and produce ideas which conform to human potentiality. In these inauspicious times, the chances of a Mozart appearing on the scene are remote. But at least the summits of human achievement make these troughs a bit more bearable.

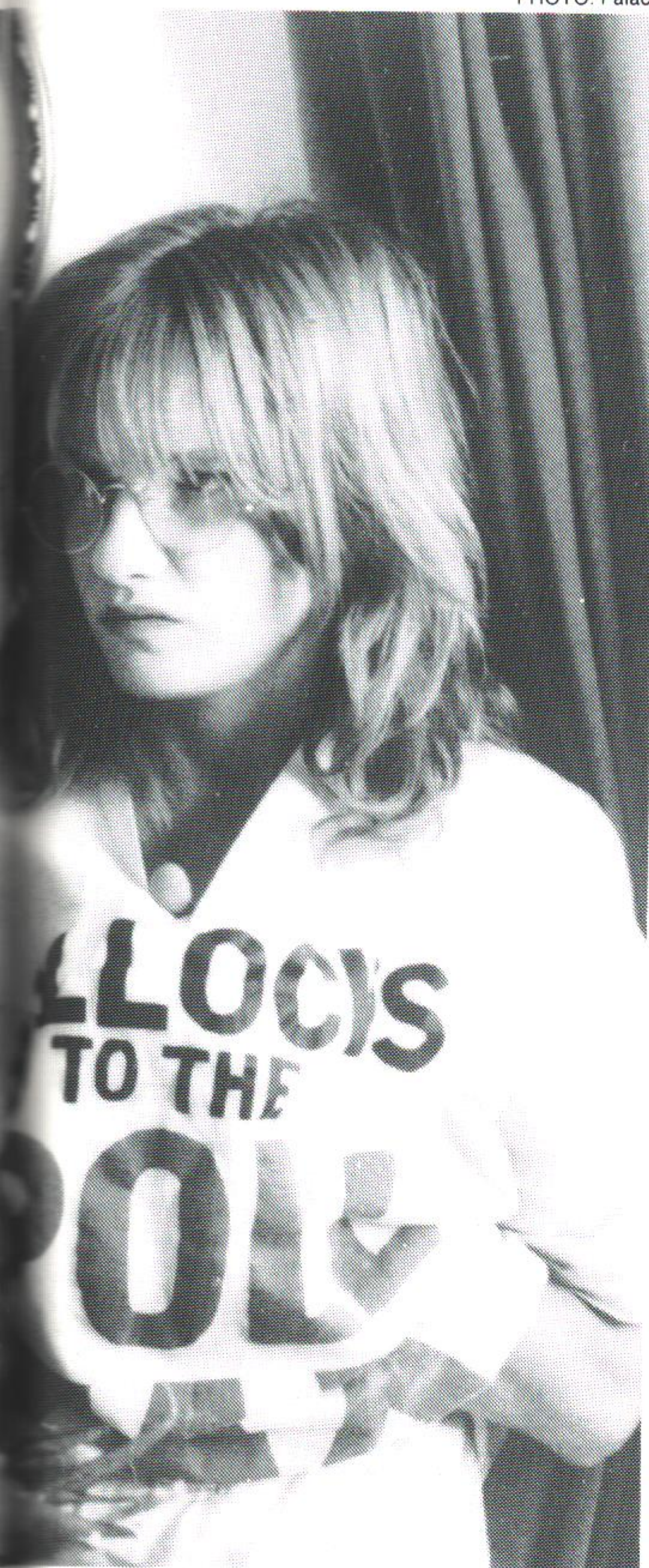


Mike Leigh

# Life is Sweet

Mike Leigh fan Toby Banks worries that his favourite director is losing his edge





*Life is Sweet* is a disappointment, and a predictable disappointment at that. Not that it's a bad film; in fact it's quite a good one, and if it were by anyone but Leigh it would be something of a miracle. Even by Leigh's own standards it is well-conceived and self-assured, and a definite improvement on his last film, 1988's uncharacteristically crass and clumsy *High Hopes*. Yet still it disappoints, because it confirms the suspicion that Leigh is content to play safe.

In his best work, whether black comedies such as *Nuts in May* (1975), *Who's Who* (1978) and *Grown-Ups* (1980), or grim dramas like *Bleak Moments* (1971) and *Meantime* (1983), Leigh pushed the tensions of domestic life beyond the bounds of British good taste. His films had an edge to them that no other director in this country could match. Yet sadly he seems destined to become just another curio, cosily ensconced in the niche reserved for idiosyncratic British film-makers. And if this does happen, Leigh must take part of the blame, for tailoring his recent work to the expectations of his audiences.

Leigh's strength was always his brilliant characterisation. By developing each

character in close collaboration with the actor playing the role, he was able to create totally believable performances. The eccentricities of each character made them more credible, rather than stereotypical. It is odd that Leigh has been accused of being patronising and snobbish towards his working class and shabby genteel characters: the humour and the dynamic of his work has come from taking his characters seriously.

## Real people

By allowing them to project themselves as real people, he has created the only truly convincing portrayals of working class life in the south of England ever to appear on film, taking them from cheery cockney sparrers to the complex characters of *Grown-Ups* and *Meantime*. In doing so, Leigh has always been unafraid to show both the excruciatingly banal and the most vulnerable, intimate aspects of day to day existence.

*Life is Sweet* is set in familiar Leigh territory, a working class family in an unspecified town somewhere in the south-east. The twin daughters are just out of school, and neither is the conventional feminine daughter their mother Wendy had hoped for. Natalie is a plumber, goes drinking with the lads and is sound as a pound. Her sister Nicola is anorexic, antagonistic and generally screwed-up. The story heads towards a typical Leigh denouement as crisis looms.

The family scenes are handled well, although Andy and Wendy are slightly underdrawn. However, nothing new comes out of this set-up, and the overall effect is bland compared with the family in *Meantime*, for example. The real weakness is the other characters, especially aspiring playboy Aubrey and the distinctly dodgy Patsy, played by Timothy Spall and Stephen Rea.

Leigh's characters usually appear more convincing as a result of their eccentricities because of the care with which he matches their accents, figures of speech, vocabulary, dress, mannerisms, and so on, to their aspirations and self-image. Leigh even cross-questions his actors about the past 'lives' of their characters. This is then situated within their surroundings and relationships with extraordinary subtlety. As a result, Leigh's characters are understandable: even the most outrageous of them have an undeniable logic. Leigh peppers his conversation with references to the 'feasibility' of his characters.

## 'Arse-scratching'

So it's odd that Timothy Spall's Aubrey should be about as unfeasible as you could hope to be, with his strangulated voice, stilted speech and bizarre clothes. Towards the end of the film he descends into caricature. Stephen Rea, on the other hand, is so low-key that he leaves no impression at all; quite an achievement for a small-time fence in a Leigh film. The sequences involving these two characters, particularly the farcical opening night at Aubrey's bistro, tend to undermine the tension that is skilfully built up during the family scenes. It is surprising to find Leigh displaying such a lack of judgement, particularly since the same criticism was levelled against parts of *High Hopes*.

For 20 years, Leigh has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to showing the ordinary lives of ordinary people, what he calls the 'nose-picking, arse-scratching mundane world'. He has been accused of voyeurism and

'sneering at the lower orders'. But he insists that he is not celebrating the sordidness of everyday life. Rather, his sympathies are with his characters, and he sees his work as a lamentation of their predicament, often achieved by heightening their individual characteristics to draw their conflicts and preoccupations to our attention. He describes his pieces as 'a celebration of people in all their detail and filigree, but also the awfulness of existence which one often talks about by sending it up'.

Given this admission, a predictable criticism often levelled against Leigh's films is that his characters are passive victims, who make no attempt to change their lives, or to express political defiance. It is an unjustified criticism, since his films tend to point up the stoicism and resilience of his characters, and were never intended as polemics in any case. Nevertheless, there has been a shift in emphasis in his later work. He describes his earliest films as slice-of-life stuff, and certainly a film like *Bleak Moments* grinds remorselessly through a series of numbingly depressing situations to the sound of strained small talk and awkward silences. By the end, nothing has changed.

But since *Meantime*, Leigh has emphasised the changes that characters and relationships undergo as a result of events in the film. His characters have become more aware of themselves, discussing their situations and talking more openly to each other. In *Life is Sweet*, Nicola comes to an understanding with both her mother and sister through extended exchanges which would have been hard to imagine in a seventies Leigh film.

## Higher hopes

As in *High Hopes*, the film ends in reconciliation, both between the characters themselves, but also in the sense that they reconcile themselves to their futures with a guarded optimism. This is an important change from Leigh's work 10 years ago, when his characters tended to accept their situation more fatalistically, or kick against it in some way. Leigh's last three major films have ended with hopes for a better future expressed through babies (*Four Days in July*, *High Hopes*), and now, in *Life is Sweet*, the restoration of family life. The more Leigh has tried to address 'issues' in his films, the more the emphasis has shifted, almost imperceptibly, to the family.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Leigh has been disoriented by the eighties, in which his class-based approach was no longer the norm. The irony is that a really uncompromising slice-of-life from someone of Leigh's talent would have a far greater impact than his current confused output.

*Life is Sweet* is at times beautifully observed (Andy's infuriating habit of speaking in a *Goon Show* voice is a masterstroke), and features another excellent performance by Leigh's wife Alison Steadman as Wendy. Yet it doesn't really add anything to Leigh's previous work, and it is hard to see why he made it at all, beyond the professional urge to keep making films. Perhaps he has simply run out of steam after 20-odd plays and films, but I don't think so. He says that his main concern is to continue to make films about youth 'which are plugged into now'. Remembering his *tour de force* with Gary Oldman, Phil Daniels and Tim Roth in *Meantime*, let's hope it happens.

*Life is Sweet* opens at the Lumière in London on 22 March



# Visions of our century

More than any other, our century has experienced the tension between the need for social change and the failure to bring it about. Stretched on the rack of this disparity has been the consciousness of the Western artist. Unable to accept the status quo but also unable to see beyond it, the century's art has swung between resistance and resignation—from the dadaist stamp and shout to the postmodern moan and giggle.

Max Ernst (1891-1976) was not a moaner, but he did like a giggle. If you want proof, go to the retrospective at the Tate Gallery which commemorates the centenary of his birth. It is an impressive display of most of the major works of this important and yet enigmatic artist.

In his own words, 'Max Ernst died on 1 August 1914. He experienced his rebirth on 11 November 1918 as a young man who was out to become a magician and discover the myth of his era'. The First World War left a terrible scar on European society, a painful reminder of its empty claim to civilisation. Perhaps of more lasting and damaging influence was the failure of any new society to break through in Western Europe in the wake of that war. In Germany the collapse of the Wilhelmine order and the subsequent defeat of the 1919 revolution led to a profound crisis of confidence in the future of society.

When Max Ernst set out to make his magic in 1919, he was not alone. The rejection of bourgeois society and its militarism was widespread, particularly among artists and intellectuals. So Ernst set off, along with Jean Arp and Johannes Baargeld, leading the dadaists in Cologne. Dada was less a movement and more an oppositional principle in diverse forms—against the war, against Western civilisation, and above all against established notions of what constituted art. It was born in neutral Zurich in 1916, and soon thrived internationally, including artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. The Berlin dadaists around Richard Huelsenbeck, George Grosz and John Heartfield were the most openly political. They set out to break every bourgeois taboo with a rage that has rarely been matched in Western culture.

Their art aimed to be revolutionary and defy every previous concept of art, breaking down the barriers between art and society. Exhibitions were disdained or made outrageous. Even with flying pigs dressed in army uniforms or young girls reading obscene poems, exhibitions remained to Ernst 'a weak illustration, like trying to capture the violence of an explosion by presenting the shrapnel'.

But Ernst aimed to do more than shock. In his work of this period he began his systematic attempt to expose what he saw to be the discredited, complacent, traditional ways of comprehending the world. He developed the technique of collage, taking pieces of everyday life such as advertising to create strange new images which resisted easy consumption. As can be seen from the

photomontages of 1920 to 1921, the different elements were distorted, recopied and enlarged so that the new image defied comprehension through the study of any detail. At the same time as Ernst's work transformed the familiar into the inexplicable, the presence of mundane items in the compositions undermined what he saw as the cultivated and meaningless language of traditional art.

Ernst did not confront society directly like other German dadaists such as Otto Dix or George Grosz. Instead, he aimed at what he called 'a painting beyond painting', a new 'super-reality' that could express the total alienation of the individual in modern Europe. At university he had been attracted by Freud's work on the interpretation of dreams. Freud's recordings of a seemingly random series of images and happenings suggested to Ernst the source of material towards his 'super-reality'.

A major influence on the dadaist and surrealist movements, Max Ernst's art is on display at the Tate. Craig Barton appraises his life and work and times

In post-war Paris, the surrealist movement was developing its own critique of the dominant worldview. André Breton and Paul Eluard had been experimenting with literary forms, using images and fragments of traditional literature to create new meanings. They saw in Ernst's collages (exhibited in Paris in 1921) a visual parallel to their poetry. Ernst moved to Paris the following year and became one of the founders of the surrealist movement.

Some of Ernst's most celebrated works come from this period and they are well represented in the exhibition. The strange and wonderful *Two Children Are Threatened By a Nightingale* has a toy gate jutting from a picture which is both serene and sinister, and contains some disturbed, dreamlike figures. It sums up much of both the dadaist and surrealist approach. It is a mysterious and beguiling appeal to the unconscious, and yet full of irreverent questions about its own status and seriousness.

Ernst remained consistent in his target—the society in which he lived. But given the failure

of any alternative, he increasingly looked elsewhere for resources with which to mount his critique: hence his contradictory attitude to the role of the artist. On one hand, he paid full attention to the development and mastery of technique: the conscious artist at work. Yet, as a man of his time, he continually looked for a method in the unconscious workings of the artist. Ernst was well aware of this contradiction and put it at the centre of his work.

In 1924, Breton signposted the further shift towards the spontaneous with his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, stating: 'It is not a matter of drawing, simply tracing.' Ernst followed suit, developing the technique of 'frottage' by rubbing soft graphite over a piece of paper placed on the floor of his hotel room. The exhibits from 1925 to 1927 show Ernst using this spontaneous element in reliefs of leaves, wood, dried bread, etc, although always within a conscious construction of his own themes.

In the thirties and forties, Ernst's growing disillusionment was reflected in paintings of increasing pessimism and foreboding, and increasing reliance on 'automatic' methods. In the thirties, he used 'grattage'—the placing of painted surfaces on each other—to produce his cities and jungle works. Civilisation was seen to face a stark choice between the anarchy of the jungle or the wasteland of the petrified deserted city. In 1940, now in New York, he began to use another 'automatic' method—'decalcomania' (pressing glass into the oils)—in *Europe After the Rain*, to show a landscape of fossilised monuments and mutants, an apocalyptic and prophetic vision of the second imperialist war.

Today, a similar malaise of doubt permeates society, but times have changed in the world of art. The dominant culture long ago recouped its losses from the onslaught of the avant garde. The shocking, disorienting and political gestures of the dadaists and surrealists have been incorporated and commodified. A lot of what they did was any way occasional and in the nature of performance. What remains has been endlessly domesticated through the likes of *Monty Python* and Benson & Hedges adverts.

But even so, the power of these originals is still extraordinary. They are a salutary reminder of a time when there was a strong tradition of artistic dissent which was determined to play its part in social change. Art does not after all have to be separate, introverted and obscurantist, even when it is being deliberately difficult and challenging—all it needs is vital political movements to relate to.

PS. It is a further sign of our benighted times that the Tate authorities have seen fit to remove Max Ernst's pictures of war in deference to the hypocritical sensibilities of the warmongers.

Max Ernst: A Retrospective is at the Tate Gallery until 21 April





Frank Cottrell-Boyce on TV

## Human trainers stalk Beverly Hills

In American ideology, the Rights of Man are interpreted as the rights of the Individual, and the enemy of the Individual is the State. This is why Americans treat taxation as a threat to civil liberties and big handguns as the implements of freedom. The noblest expression of this idea is Kirk's formulation in *Star Trek III: The Search For Spock*, 'The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many'. Sometimes you can glimpse what a society built on such profound reverence for the worth of the person might be like, on *Sesame Street* (Channel 4). Here, equal respect is shown not just to black, white and Hispanic people, but also to talking mammoths with long nylon hair and towering, slow-witted yellow birds. People who live in trashcans also get their say.

At the same time, America is the birthplace of cheery uniformity. The success of McDonald's, for instance, is predicated on the notion that everyone in the world—from the snow-dazzled Inuit to the trail-weary Tuareg—likes not only the same kind of burger but the same kind of ketchup on it. The

Social success here exacts a terrible price. In one episode a cheer-leader has been raped by a football star. She refuses to do anything about it because she wants to stay popular. When confronted by our heroine, Brenda, the girl says, in a moment of Cartesian insight, 'If I say anything, I will be nothing'. There is no Being outside this peer group (it is particularly difficult in Beverly Hills where people major in Being rather than Doing). Shortly after this harrowing exchange, the cheer-leaders come cavorting through the locker corridor, banging drums and shouting. It looks like a Nazi rally. Andrea, the show's resident intellectual (she wears glasses), remarks, 'Now do you see why I despise the student body?'. The word body is horribly resonant. The school looms up as a guzzling leviathan digesting its own members into its monstrous corporation.

The heroes of *Beverly Hills 90210*, Brandon and Brenda, stand out against this peer pressure. They are from out of town, so they have a different perspective. They are from a home where their

others. So Brenda joins a Rap Line—a kind of student Samaritans—which is how she finds out about the raped cheer-leader. And here is an interesting twist. The emotional and moral core of this episode is not the cheer-leader's dilemma, but the choices that this dilemma gives to Brenda. Now, obviously Brenda is the one with the long-term contract, so we have to focus more on her. Nevertheless, the dilemma on which we focus is still not the question of whether to report this rape (even through Brenda's eyes), but the question of whether it was right for Brenda to answer the Rap Line phone after hours. This was against the rules, but the cheer-leader always rang after the line was closed.

In fact once Brenda realised that a rape was involved it took her about 30 seconds to call in the police. She agonised for about half an episode, however, about whether she should answer that call. This trick of raising a serious subject briefly and fretting about a trivial one is where the show gets its tone—at once concerned and shallow. In another episode Brandon is accused of cheating in a history test because he scored well even though he had made a stand against a fuddy-duddy teacher's approach. Brandon wanted to be invited to think, rather than to regurgitate facts. The test itself was about the genocide of native Americans. The effect of the episode was to make you feel that Brandon's Socratic philosophy of education was more important than the fact of Wounded Knee.

Similarly, Brenda's stand against the Rap Line authorities was based not on the urgency of the case but on the primacy of Brenda's conscience. All the stories demonstrate again and again the huge importance of the affable, liberal central characters and the unimportance of the rest of the world. Brandon and Brenda thus appear desirable but disproportionate—the human equivalents of Nike high-sided trainers. Where Rambo could demolish small nations with his firepower, these nice people simply eclipse them with their navels.

Which brings me back to *Sesame Street*. I don't know if you're familiar with Filipino TV, but it's mostly Filipino versions of Rambo blasting away at each other. One of the few oases of calm and wit is—or has been till now—a programme called *Baitbot*, a kind of Bert and Ernie double act which stars a monkey named Kiko and a turtle called Pong. Last year the show won the prestigious *Prix Jeunesse* in Munich. As soon as it started to attract the attention of the international production community, however, the low budget, high creativity show—made in an abandoned lumber yard—came in for the heavy firepower of, yes, *Sesame Street*. Children's Television Workshop told *Baitbot's* producer, Lydia Benitez Brown, to stop producing, as Kiko and Pong are too close to Big Bird and Kermit for comfort. (In fact they are figures from Filipino folklore.) So we can now formulate a definition of liberal imperialism—if you want to stare at a navel, fine; just make sure it's *my* navel you're staring at.

### Where Rambo could demolish small nations with his firepower, these nice people simply eclipse them with their navels

equality of all mankind means global portion control. In the rest of the world, to be a rebel you have to raise a proletarian army and nationalise the land. In America, to be a rebel all you need is a big motorbike, poor diction and a relaxed attitude towards shaving (you have to be a man). The norms are so carefully policed that infringements of etiquette look subversive. And if the state cannot make you conform, the market can. In fact, the market can make you want to conform.

*Beverly Hills 90210* (ITV) looks hard at this tension between individual liberty and the individual's desire to follow the herd. The action takes place in West Beverly High—a school with the same social geography as the school in *Heathers*. The boys aspire to be jocks; the girls aspire to be cheer-leaders. Those that don't make the grade don't count.

liberal parents have shown them enough respect—between trips to the bottle bank and the paper-recycling plant—to ensure that they have too much self-esteem to feel overwhelmed by such forces. Whereas the heroes of *Heathers* had to shoot their way out of the Prom Pack, Brandon and Brenda simply rise above it. They are attractive and articulate. They go surfing before school. They have access to cars and relationships. These aren't teenagers, they're trainee adults. Even when Brandon is being pursued by Gina, a Madonna wannabee wild child who offers to smear his whole body with aromatic oils, he says nothing lascivious, though he does express an interest in the nature and effectiveness of aquapressure.

Unlike Andrea, Brandon and Brenda do not despise their fellows. They are concerned by their plight. They want to help. They want to *be* there for



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# the marxist review of books

The work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges and others expresses the preoccupations of a continent struggling to come to terms with its own peculiar historical experience. **Alistair Ward** examines the equivocal relationship between Latin American fiction and history

## Once upon a time in Latin America

Books discussed in this article include Isabel Allende, **Eva Luna**, Penguin, £5.99 pbk; Isabel Allende, **The Stories of Eva Luna**, Hamish Hamilton, £13.99 hbk; Jorge Luis Borges, **Seven Nights**, Faber & Faber, £3.95 pbk; Gabriel Garcia Marquez, **One Hundred Years of Solitude**, Picador, £5.99 pbk; Gabriel Garcia Marquez, **The General in His Labyrinth**, Jonathan Cape, £13.99 hbk; Octavio Paz, **The Labyrinth of Solitude**, King Penguin, £3.95 pbk; Nicholas Shakespeare, **The Vision of Elena Silves**, Penguin, £4.99 pbk

The novel in Europe came to prominence as the representative art form of the rising bourgeoisie. The great works of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist tradition became the central canon around which the critical conception of distinctly national literatures was consolidated on the Continent and in Britain. By contrast, the characteristic concerns of Latin American literature appear to have been shaped in relation to the failure of its late-developing middle classes to produce stable and convincing nationalisms out of the fragmentation of the Spanish colonial structure.

The Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, has pointed out the difficulty of satisfactorily explaining 'the national differences between Argentinians and Uruguayans, Peruvians and Ecuadoreans, Guatemalans and Mexicans' (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p114). The literary response of writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende has been a preoccupation with the inadequacy of the approved historical record as a realisation of the real processes at work in South American society; and an evocation of a South American identity which transcends the artificial nationalist appendages that have sought to legitimise the continent's existing state structure.

Marquez's latest novel, *The General in His Labyrinth*, throws light upon the problematic nature of the new nations born out of the South American independence movement of the early nineteenth century, through a recreation of the final journey into exile and death of its greatest hero, Simon Bolivar. After ridding half a continent of Spanish rule, Bolivar finds his dreams of a united Gran

Colombia heading a South American assembly of nations shattered by the separatist manoeuvres of General Paez in Venezuela and the political intrigues of the New Grenadian federalists led by Santander.

Marquez portrays Bolivar as a pivotal figure of South American history: a representative of the urban, intellectual elite which attempted to apply European and North American revolutionary ideals to the incongruous political environment of the Spanish Empire; but who, brutalised by 20 years of war and the attempt to hold a fragmenting country together, came to foreshadow the numerous military adventurers or *caudillos* that were to impose central control by force. For Bolivar's expulsion of Spain rid the continent of the only force capable of uniting it.

The war of independence in the British colonies to the north was led by a large bourgeoisie which had developed over a long period of autonomy against the projected imposition of tighter control by the 'mother country'. Its victory and the formation of the USA consolidated the internal development of capitalism in North America. Latin America, born out of the conquest of the indigenous peoples on behalf of the Crown rather than out of the settling of dissenting immigrants, sustained a far closer economic relationship with Spain. Economic activity was geared towards agriculture, organised on the basis of the feudal landed estate or hacienda, and the extraction and export of raw materials using Indian labour. The growth of an indigenous middle class was consequently limited.

Independence brought the transfer of power from Spanish officialdom to native feudal oligarchies. The absence of a stable middle class with an interest in imposing a national market and the central control of the main urban centres over the interior encouraged a process of political fragmentation. New states were established upon the basis of regional splits between the landed interests of different provinces and the *caudillos* they relied on to secure their privileges, rather than according to the requirements of distinct capitalist classes.

The consequent artificiality of the post-independence political constructs; the failure of the momentous political developments to alter fundamentally the economic structure of society; and the cynicism with which various parties and strongmen appealed to the principles of nineteenth-century European liberalism in the course of the countless civil wars and personal tyrannies that benighted South America throughout the rest of the century; all these have contributed to the equivocal relationship of Latin American fiction to the continent's history.



Octavio Paz writes that 'reality—that is, the world that surrounds us—exists by itself here, has a life of its own, and was not invented by man as it was in the US' (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, p11). The world of South American fiction does indeed confront the reader as strange and impenetrable; a world of contrasts which defies incorporation into the comfortable but inappropriate categories of an alien rationality.

History and chronology, Jorge Luis Borges has argued, are European inventions; and in Marquez and Allende's fictional representation of a South American reality constantly breaking the bounds of these imported formulas, they become just one of a series of available rationalisations of time. For, writes Allende, 'all ages of history coexist in this immoderate geography' (*Eva Luna*, p158). The official histories of the post-independence nations are partial and superficial representations of a much deeper reality, which acquires in the novels of Marquez and Allende the insubstantial and bewildering quality of a nightmare.

Columbia's civil wars are portrayed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as brutal and irrational intrusions into the community of Macondo—self-generating wars whose original motivation has become lost in the past. A banana boom follows them, precipitating gringo interference, labour unrest and a massacre of striking workers which is so rigorously covered up by the authorities that the community begins to doubt the credence of its historical memory. The massacre of workers recedes into myth and Macondo begins to question whether the banana company itself had ever existed.

Consciousness succumbs to the depredations of a 'voracious oblivion' which, like the jungle, threatens to engulf both habitation and memory 'in an instant's inattention' (*Eva Luna*, p130). The passing of time itself is thrown into doubt: each generation of the Buendias family repeats its predecessor and time appears to turn full circle, as the progressive development of national history succumbs to the static and cyclical unfolding of an already foretold family destiny.

The goal of historical development appears equally unattainable in the undefined Venezuela of Allende's *Eva Luna*, where coups and palace revolutions repeat themselves with the futility of Colombia's perpetual civil wars. El Benefactor, modelled on the long-serving tyrant Gomez (1908-35), is replaced after a brief period of republican government by a military dictatorship. In turn, its fall inaugurates a period of democratic rule in the interests of foreign investment and the propertied minority which had prospered under the earlier tyrannies.

Each of these transitions intrudes briefly into the popular consciousness in the form of a temporary release of energy and freedom, before the nation sinks back into its uncertain slumber and inertia, inactivity and corruption eased by the palliative of oil. The fall of the general barely upsets the routine of the provincial community of Agua Santa. Its police chief is forced to leave the local fiesta to receive instructions from his superiors in the capital, but returns a couple of hours later, 'saying the whole damn thing was a storm in a teacup; the government had fallen but nothing had changed' (*Eva Luna*, p159).

But disregard for the political machinations of the capital is very close to complicity: Agua Santa, it turns out, services the infamous camp for political prisoners of Santa Maria. And as Eva grows up, the political struggles of her country become harder to evade. Naranjo, her lover, joins the guerrilla movement in the mountains; and her return to Agua Santa is in aid of an operation to break prisoners out of the neighbouring camp.

The story of Eva's emotional maturation parallels the distorted development of South America's political consciousness. The post-First World War shift, from a primary export economy to internal industrialisation heavily dependent upon foreign investment, precipitates the late development of new social forces capable of challenging the traditional dominance of the landed oligarchy over a largely peasant population. Rapid urbanisation extends the influence of a fragile bourgeoisie, reliant upon an uneasy relationship with the military establishment to protect their business interests; while the new cities, and the extremes of wealth and poverty that they generate, create the environment for the growth of new popular political movements.

Ultimately, however, political struggle is represented in Allende's

fiction as a gesture rather than a solution. It is a utopian expression of the desire for justice which increasingly is confined to the fringes of society, as the mountain war between the army and the guerrillas degenerates into a personal duel far from the real experience of people in the cities.

The fictional imagination, alone, is capable of accommodating the shifting and wide-ranging reality of South American experience and transcending the futility of its painful history. Thus Eva Luna justifies her art: 'Reality is a jumble we can't always measure or decipher, because everything is happening at the same time. Whilst you and I are speaking here, behind your back Christopher Columbus is discovering America, and the same Indians that welcome him in that stained-glass window are still naked in a jungle a few hours from this office, and will be a hundred years from now. I try to open a path through that maze, to put a little order in that chaos, to make life more bearable.' (*Eva Luna*, p266)

In Allende's most recent book of short stories, *Eva Luna*—one of the children of the moon—returns to shed her protean light upon some of the familiar hybrids of Latin American literature. The cast of revolutionary priests, innocent whores and love-sick dictators who populate *The Stories of Eva Luna* are the subverted archetypes of a twilight landscape which operates according to an unpredictable and mysterious but nonetheless rigorous justice.

In his meditative essay *Seven Nights*, Borges writes that 'what we call chance is our ignorance of the complex machinery of causality' (p8). Latin American fiction delights in the unravelling of these hidden connections, in the illustration of a fatalism much closer to most South Americans' experience than the discredited pretensions of successive governments to change and reform. This fatalism gives expression to the paralysis of a society unable to determine the direction of its development.

The attempt by nationalist governments of the left and right to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the post-war period, by encouraging internal industrialisation through import substitution and state control of resources, has led up the blind alley of the debt crisis into renewed economic and political dependence on the USA. The frustration which results from this impotent rejection of foreign interference expresses itself in much Latin American literature as an acute sense of its culture's uniqueness—a uniqueness which sets it apart from its more prosperous but less spiritual northern neighbours. This can be seen in *The Stories of Eva Luna*, in which the narrator is projected as a contemporary Scheherazade discovering within her own land the sinister exoticism of a modern-day Orient.

In Nicholas Shakespeare's new novel, this evocation of the strangeness of South American experience is developed into a study of the assertion of cultural identity through the renunciation of its tainted historical legacy. In *The Visions of Elena Silves*, Don Leopoldo, the self-proclaimed nationalist historian of Belen, with his enthusiasm for the historical figures of Lord Cochrane (an English adventurer who participated in the 'liberation' of Peru) and Admiral Grau (the quixotic hero of a futile territorial dispute with neighbouring Ecuador), provides an ironic commentary upon a fragile Peruvian nationalism under the assault of the Shining Path guerrilla movement.

Communism is suspect too as a foreign value implanted among the people of Peru. Hence the Maoist movement of 'Presidente Ezekiel', established in reaction to the ineffectual Cuban-inspired revolutionary movements of the sixties, which insists that Peru's revolution must be indigenous and based on an understanding of the country's genuine condition—that it is a land of Indians. Shining Path's illusory enterprise of returning its country to the primitive communism of the Incas becomes for Shakespeare a potent symbol of modern-day Peru's inability to come to terms with itself.

The self-abnegation which characterises the story of the novel's two main protagonists, Gabriel and Elena, who attempt to escape from their love for one another in political and religious faith respectively, pervades the novel's understanding of Peruvian national existence. And this finds its logical conclusion in the revolutionaries' desire for liberation, not through a progression beyond the existing organisation of society, but via the repudiation of Peru's modern historical experience.



For half a century the liberal intelligentsia in Britain has grown progressively more morose about the future progress of society. **James Heartfield** examines the roots of its despair and looks at how the left has dealt with that scepticism

# From relativism to reaction

Books discussed in this article include Bryan Appleyard, **The Pleasures of the Peace: Art and Imagination in Post-War Britain**, Faber & Faber, £6.99 pbk; Andrea Nye, **Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic**, Routledge, £30 hbk, £9.99 pbk; Robert Young, **White Mythologies: Writing, History and the West**, Routledge, £30 hbk, £9.99 pbk

The surprising thing about Bryan Appleyard's survey of the art and philosophy of the post-war period is the pessimism of his subject, the middle class intelligentsia. The years of post-war reconstruction, of prime ministers Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, usually held to be an optimistic if initially difficult time, appear in the eyes of the intellectuals as a time of doubt, verging on despair. The optimism of the post-war years proves to be a fragile and contingent moment in a long stretch of cynicism.

Perhaps it was to be expected that Britain would emerge from the war with a sense of uneasiness. In defeating Germany, Britain had surrendered its position as the leading power to the USA. Certainly the Edwardian belief in progress had been dashed by the sheer horror of the war. HG Wells, writing as he was dying of cancer, feared: 'Our world is not merely bankrupt; there remains no dividend at all; it has not simply liquidated; it is going clean out of existence, leaving not a wrack behind. The attempt to trace a pattern of any sort is absolutely futile.' (*The Pleasures of the Peace*, p7)

So much of traditional authority had been demeaned in the war years—the appeasers in the Tory Party, the Nazi sympathisers in the royal family—many intellectuals, like architect Maxwell Fry and literary editor Cyril Connolly, felt the need of a 'prevailing myth' that might hold society together (p28). It is compelling just how cynical was that aspiration—not for a substantial social project but for a convincing story to tell the less jaded lower orders.

There were two contenders for the role of a 'prevailing myth' around which to organise society. The loser was a kind of organic conservatism that looked back to a rural and traditional past. It was promoted by intellectuals like FR Leavis, the literary critic who had persuaded Cambridge to adopt an English literature syllabus, and novelist Evelyn Waugh, with his Anglo-Catholic vision of the great families.

Their 'Merrie England' lost out to the 'Festival of Britain' in 1951. Appleyard describes 'what was being celebrated at the festival was not imperial pomp but British ingenuity and humanity, the wonders of science and sheer lightness of the world to come. It was an attempt to will into existence a prevailing myth, humanist and reasonable which would sweep away the darkness of the past' (p31).

The festival drew on the intellectual resources of the positivist and analytical philosophers, Bertrand Russell and AJ Ayer. Russell's celebration of progress was unalloyed Enlightenment optimism: 'The triumphs of science are due to the substitution of observation and inference for authority. Every attempt to revive authority in intellectual matters is a retrograde step. And it is part of the scientific attitude that the pronouncements of science do not claim to be certain, but only the most probable on present evidence. One of the greatest benefits that science confers upon those who understand its spirit is that it enables them to live without the

delusive support of subjective certainty. That is why science cannot favour persecution.' (*The Pleasures of the Peace*, p44)

While Russell celebrated science over authority, it fell to Ayer to dispense with the 'false' questions of values and meaning, as unyielding to rational investigation. As Appleyard notes, this was the hard sceptical mode, 'the weapon that was at hand for the assault on the old illusions to be conducted by a generation in the 1950s and 1960s' (p47). Little did Ayer know that his decidedly anti-mythical stance would be pressed into service as the 'prevailing myth'.

Ayer and Russell popularised a philosophical viewpoint as no one has since. But it was Labour Party leader Harold Wilson who turned the positivist philosophy into a political manifesto. 'The searing white heat of the technological revolution' promised by Wilson in his celebrated campaign for the 1964 general election was a further development of the Festival of Britain style.

Under the slogan of modernisation, Wilson set aside social problems and promised a resolution of want through progress. The new modernising project seemed to cut through the conflict of left and right and replace it with a contest between past privilege and modern meritocracy. In the 1964 general election campaign, Wilson mocked Sir Alec Douglas-Home (Lord Home of Hirsell). Wilson challenged: 'Why should anyone listen to the fourteenth Lord Home?' Home's reply, if it did not save him the election, did hint at the problems that Wilson was storing up for the future: 'Why should anyone listen to the fourteenth Mr Wilson?' Wilson had ridiculed established authority, but the project that he proposed as an alternative rested uneasily on the ability of the British economy to deliver the goods.

The philosophers too were finding that their certainties were more precarious than they had thought. Ayer and Russell were buoyant, having discovered a brilliant new thinker, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who promised a final resolution of the false problems of metaphysics. In his first work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein explained that questions of meaning and of value were false because they were simply ill-framed. Philosophy could only deal with questions of fact. Anything else only seemed more profound, but was in truth just confused. The *Tractatus* ended with a warning against the empty phrasemongering that had dogged previous thinkers: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' (*The Pleasures of the Peace*, p166)

But the persistence of the 'whereof one cannot speak' haunted Wittgenstein. On reflection, he was struck by the complexity and indeterminacy of language, which had seemed an open book to him earlier. His new approach, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, was much more ambiguous, to the horror of Bertrand Russell, who heckled his lectures.

Appleyard's topic is principally the arts and only tangentially social thought, but this approach has its insights. The intelligentsia was already predisposed to a relativistic view in the arts, and Wittgenstein's recantation of positivism made relativism more palatable. Of pop art, *Encounter* wrote: 'The most important new concept in American art is that "everything" can be art, and art can be "everything".' (*The Pleasures of the Peace*, p133) Art critic Herbert Read drew the threads together: 'We have now reached a stage of relativism in philosophy just where it is possible to affirm that reality is in fact subjectivity, which means that the individual has no choice but to construct his own reality, however arbitrary and even "absurd" that may seem. This is the position reached by the existentialists, and to it corresponds a position in the world of art that requires a similar decision.' (p54)



If the problems of positivism were restricted to philosophy or the arts they would be of little consequence, but it was inconceivable that they would be. This is because the failure of positivism spoke of a broader problem of self-doubt in the establishment. Social projects foundered on British economic decline. Although the intelligentsia voiced the problem too freely, it was nonetheless an anxiety shared, with more circumspection, by the establishment. Unable to project a positive vision of the future, they found that they could not return to the traditional conservatism of the past because it was too discredited.

For the left, the relativistic outlook seemed to hold out new opportunities. Established authority was being assailed from all sides. All points of view were of equal value—even the left's. But rather than propose an alternative project for society, the left chose to assert its claim to its own space. The effect was to reinforce the relativistic outlook of the intelligentsia, while investing it with the allure of a dangerous iconoclasm.

Appleyard's brief does not allow him to draw out the impact of the left's contribution to relativism, but two contemporary examples illustrate the scope of its influence. In *Words of Power*,

'Western historicism', a treatment of history that serves only to uphold 'neo-colonialism'. It is of course true that history is written from the point of view of the victors. But Young's solution is to reject altogether the possibility of a unitary history. The categories of historical writing are rejected as empty abstractions that are blind to the particular experience of the colonial subject or 'other': 'In Western philosophy, when knowledge or theory comprehends the other, then the alterity of the latter vanishes as it becomes part of the same. This "ontological imperialism"...goes back at least to Socrates.' (p13)

It is ironic that Young charges Western historicism with an excess of abstraction. His own approach spurns empirical research for an exegesis on the texts. In itself this is a quite a useful survey, covering Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, structuralism, the work of the Palestinian Edward Said, as well as the deconstructionists Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. But you cannot help noticing that the index has 14 entries for Aesthetic and only one for Africa. The overwhelming impression is that the rejection of traditional certainties has itself become something of a dogma with its own list of patron saints. At one point Young refers unself-

## Young's real target is the 'imperialism' exercised by English professors over the syllabuses of their younger rivals

American professor Andrea Nye gives 'a feminist reading of the history of logic', while in *White Mythologies* Robert Young, an English tutor at Wadham College, Oxford, attacks the 'Eurocentrism' of written history. Explicit in both books is a critique of reason and history, representing the culmination of a development in left-wing thinking over the past 30 years.

Andrea Nye's book draws upon a history of logic syllabus that threatens at times to overpower her thesis, but is well presented, if a little condensed towards the later chapters. Her argument takes force from the formalism of traditional logic which she lampoons with charm, refusing the injunction to consider it apart from its historical development. Logic, she explains, was coined as a method of disputation in the courts of ancient Greece. As the skills of the logicians increased, the substantial question of where right lay was lost.

Logic became a system whereby the universal concept of 'man' became an exclusive term for the propertied white male. It was a 'language...capable of generating its own cosmos, the cosmos of sexist, racist, ethnocentric culture' (*Words of Power*, p79). This is why there can be no feminist appropriation of logic: 'If the point of logic is to frame a way of speaking in which what another says does not have to be heard or understood, in which only the voice of a single unitary authority is meaningful, in which we can avoid understanding even what we say to ourselves, then no application of logic can be feminist.' (p179)

Underlying Nye's argument is an elision between authority in argument and institutional authority, such as holds in the family. That the goal of logic should be agreement—'a single unitary authority'—is a different proposition than the institutional dominance implied by the form of the words used. Logic renders a variety of experiences commensurate. That comparability of human experience makes logic a weapon against institutional authority. The many examples of the narrow definition of 'man' Nye cites are the failure of logic to transcend the primitive social conditions of its day. Nonetheless, the very possibility of treating differing experiences on an equal footing contains the possibility of women's equality. In Nye's treatment, however, women's substantial charge against society is reposed as a charge against logic. The aspiration to a unitary point of view is rejected in favour of a relativistic approach in the name of women.

Robert Young's *White Mythologies* aims to criticise what he calls

consciously to the 'long tradition...which has interrogated the privileging of high culture' (p133). Perhaps the long tradition of relativism, from the existentialists to the deconstructionists, is now part of the high culture itself.

More seriously, the charge of 'ontological imperialism' conflates humanism with imperialism, just as Nye conflates logic and sexism. Opposition to imperialism is redirected against a universalist worldview, with which it is identified. It should be noted that Young's substantial concern is not to oppose the imperialism exercised by the Western powers over the third world. He writes: 'Nationalist resistance to imperialism, for example, itself derives its notion of nation and of national self-determination from the Western culture that is being resisted. Nationalism is a product of imperialism.' (p168) He continues, 'the exclusive focus on "resistance" as a privileged political category is itself open to question' (p86).

Young's real target is the 'imperialism' exercised by English professors over the syllabuses of their younger rivals. While he lectures opponents of imperialism, he maps out a project of studying English literature: 'Colonial discourse analysis is placed in the unique position of being able to examine English culture, literature and indeed [if that seems too modest] Englishness in its widest sense.' (p174)

Both Nye and Young demonstrate that if the emotional content of their work is opposition to women's oppression or imperialism, its theoretical content is the same relativistic outlook that prevails throughout the intelligentsia. (And in Young it is explicit that relativism takes primacy over anti-imperialism.) Appleyard's solution is no more positive than the problem he identifies. Instead of failed positivism and nihilistic relativism, he yearns for a reconstitution of the organic conservatism of the forties, however difficult that might seem: 'Perhaps there is a line that would enable us to join hands with the builders of Lincoln's Angel Choir [a medieval cathedral]. One thing, however, our period should have proved beyond all doubt: it is curved.' (*The Pleasures of the Peace*, p340) That curve is a minor concession to relativism. If Britain follows the trend set in America by the conservative critic of the left's moral relativism, Allan Bloom, there will be less concessions and more forthright reaction. As long as relativism is the only alternative, reaction is likely to succeed.





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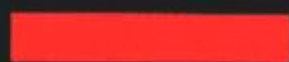
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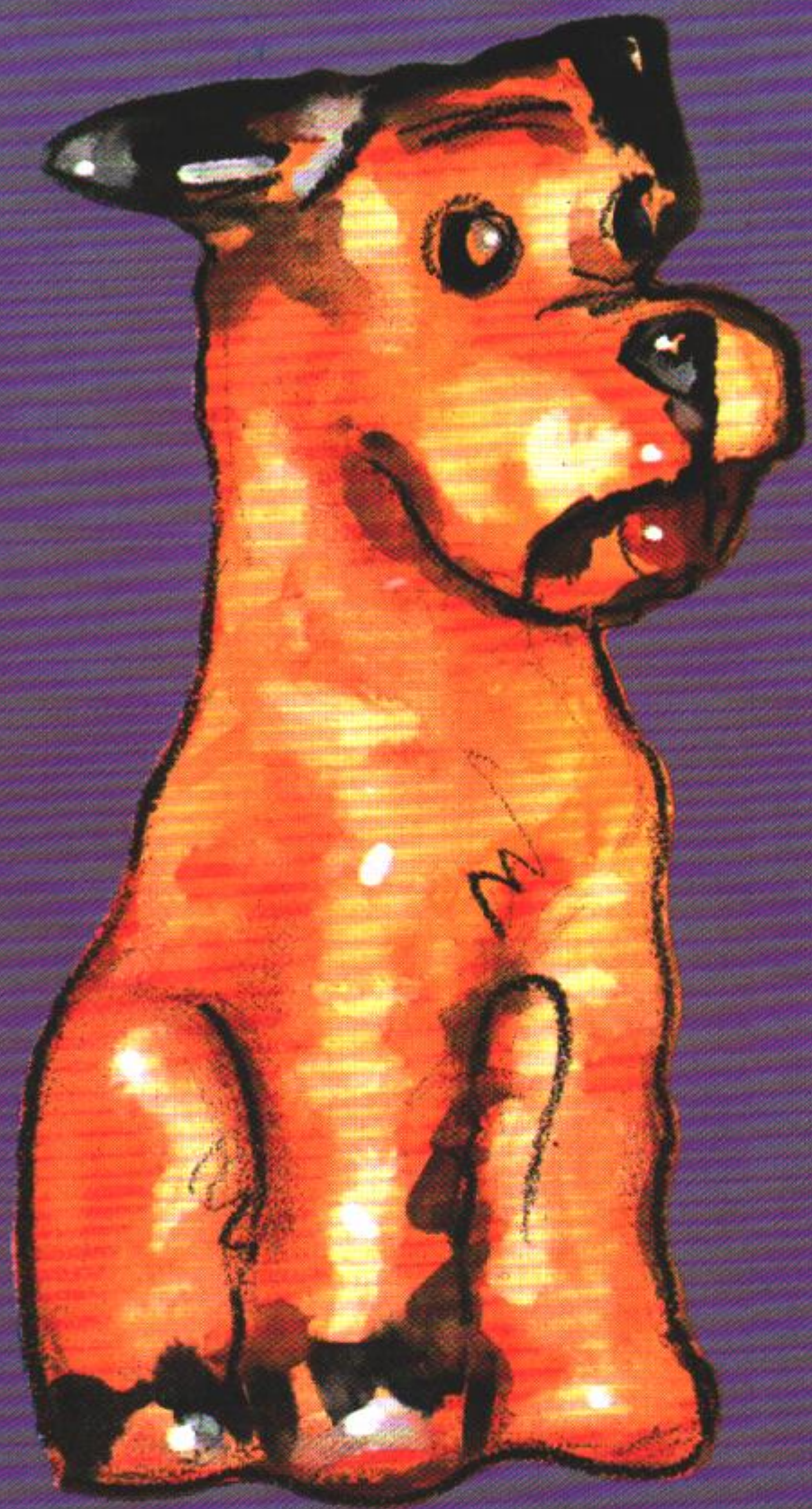
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