

# LIVING MARXISM



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March 1992 No41

From Croatia to Columbus: why they are rewriting history



**'WHO CONTROLS  
THE PAST  
CONTROLS  
THE FUTURE'**

**GEORGE ORWELL  
NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR**

**Economic slump — the silent election issue**

**Plus: Natural childbirth ● Benetton ads ● Scotland's future**

**The 'Islamic bomb' ● Nazis, New Women and much more**



# konkret

## »NOW'S THE TIME TO TEAR OUT THE RED MENACE BY THE ROOTS! IT'S SUCH A JOY TO BE ALIVE!«

Name me the German revolutionary (and when did he or she live) who could have uttered this jubilant cry. Could it have been every single one alive in November of 1989? Maybe half of them in October of 1990? Wolf-Sascha de Misère or perhaps Helmut Graf Lafontaine on the newly ordained National Holiday of October 1991? Wrong and wrong and wrong again. The person who dotted these lines in his diary and lent himself the status of national revolutionary was none other than Goebbels (Joseph). And the date? The day of Adolf Hitler's election as German chancellor.

But the *Führer's* head ad-man, it turned out, had rejoiced too early: Nine years later those set to be uprooted had routed the German *Wehrmacht*—at, of all places on earth, Stalingrad the German troops lost their will to live and their desire to kill. Not even the *Führer* would have dreamt that 50 years later the President of a Russian Republic would issue an interdict on the Volga outlawing the Communist Party and setting up an autonomous Ethnic German Republic.

What is history trying to teach us? That things first turn out differently and then re-turn to what we always thought they were? Surely. But history can also show us that history never ends—particularly whenever everyone is convinced of its inevitable if not immediate demise. Now's the time to tear out the red menace by the roots. Is it really such a joy to be alive? The only ones who seem truly thrilled are the carpetbaggers and a few straggling brown-suited comrades. Everyone else wheezes and whines and whimpers. They're terrified of tomorrow—will it mean the end of one's job, the expulsion from one's domicile, the relief of one's means of transportation? Does tomorrow spell inflation, poison in the daily ration, the drug death of a child, a heart attack, cancer or even worse: having to suffer the dismal *dasein* of inner-German refugees sequestered in the romper room of one's very own suburban bungalow built on borrowed money. In the night then the mare of the day on which the dam breaks at the Oder and Neisse Rivers protecting the first-world enclave against the wretched masses from without.

Maybe the universal triumph over the reds is but a transient state. Who knows. This, in any case, shall be our position until we have been taught better and history has come to a complete standstill—until the cry »Socialism or Barbarism!« has irrevocably given way to »Barbarism or Bust!«. Until then: KONKRET intends to remain, even in the Fourth Reich, the last, the only, the incorrigible, the anticapitalist, the un-German German monthly magazine covering things politic and cultural.

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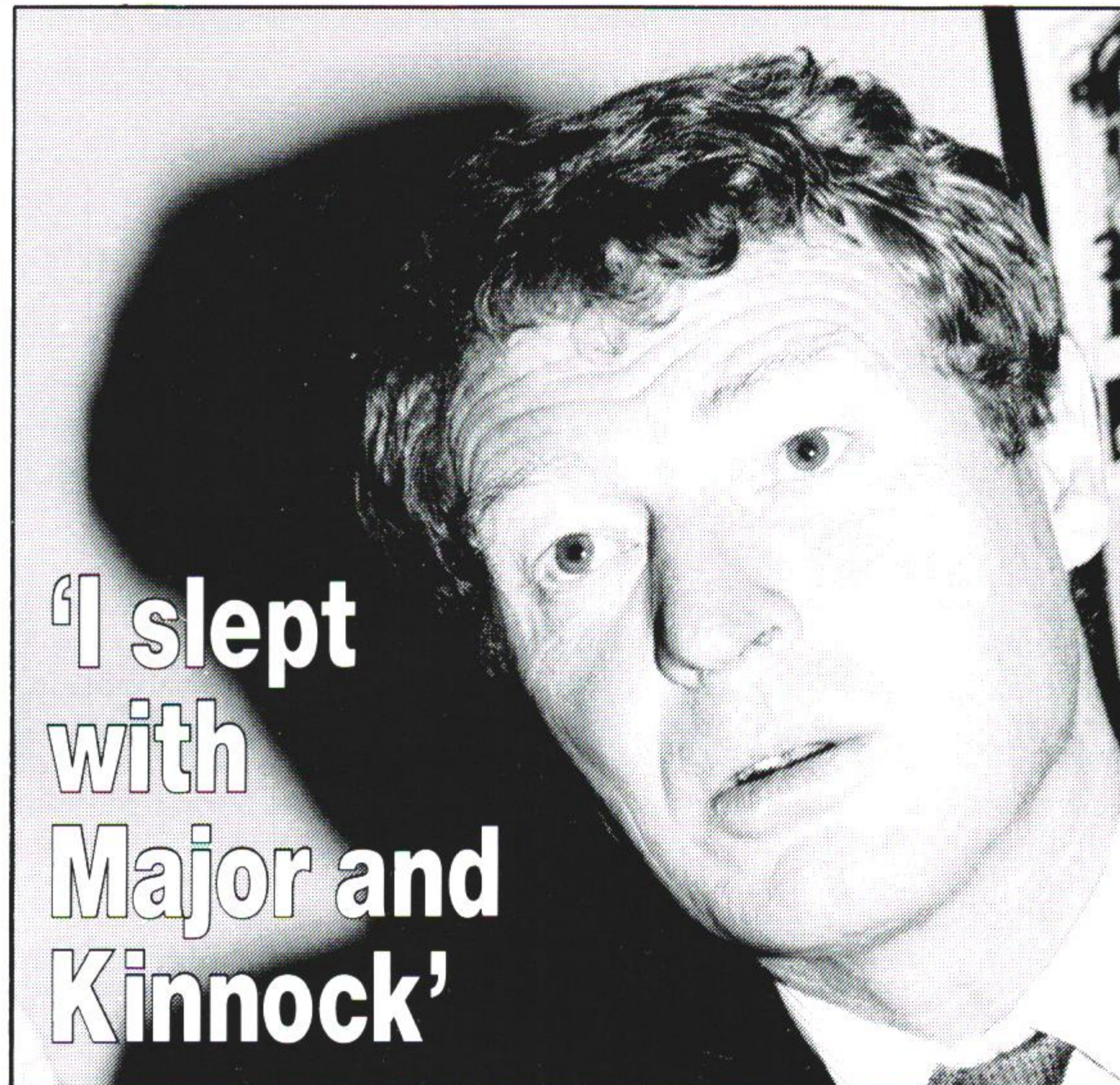
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In fact we all did. Who could avoid nodding off while trying to follow their dull pre-election campaigns, and the accompanying stories about the boring little sex lives of boring politicians?

At a time when, East and West, the world is changing so fast, British electoral politics remain an insomniac's dream. The parties should count themselves lucky if enough voters get out of bed to give any of them a majority.

The one place where the election campaign will be worth following is in the pages of *Living Marxism*. We are less interested in discussing what the politicians do to whom in private than in exposing how they are doing the same thing to the public.

If you want to break out of the grey and stay awake until polling day, don't miss April's *Living Marxism* election special—in your newsagents on 26 March.

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## The construction of the Islamic Bomb

**T**he Cold War may be over, but British and American statesmen have started warning of an even worse 'nuclear nightmare' to come: the transfer of control over nuclear weapons and scientists from the Kremlin to the unstable citadels of the third world.

For 40 years we were told that Western civilisation was threatened by the Communist Bomb—a threat which turned out to be as empty as the shop shelves in the collapsed Soviet 'superpower'. Now we are told that life in the West is imperilled by the future threat of the Islamic Bomb. This new

nuclear arsenal is meant to be supplied from within the ex-Soviet Union, and wielded by the Muslim regimes of the Middle or Far East.

It is impossible to be certain which third world countries might be close to developing nuclear weapons. But *Living Marxism* can reveal which states have been most closely involved in the construction of the Islamic Bomb issue: the USA and Britain.

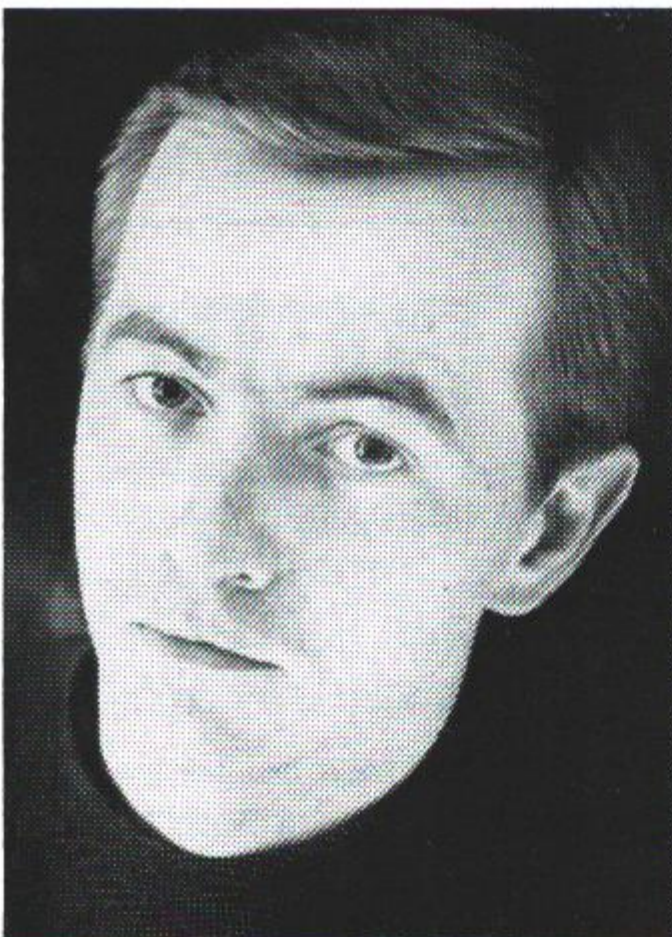
The Anglo-American allies have worked flat out for two and a half years to construct a scare about renegade scientists and third world regimes threatening the world. The aim of their campaign has been to legitimise

the West's own nuclear militarism—and the global power status that goes with it.

The Western powers have no real need to panic about the prospect of third world states obtaining nukes. In principle, it is possible for any country to get the materials for making an atomic device, and several may have done so. In practice, however, producing an effective nuclear weapon is not so simple as the British media might have us believe.

In the age of satellite surveillance, secrecy is all but impossible for third world states. None could get close to having a functioning nuclear weapon without some kind of tests or without the West finding out. Once spotted, any nuclear development could easily be blown away by the vastly superior *conventional* firepower of the USA, Britain and their allies. A decade ago, when the West gave the nod, one Israeli air-raid bombed Iraq's would-be nuclear reactor into a pile of rubble.

● On the fantastic assumption that an Islamic state had developed a nuclear bomb and wanted to use it, they would find it difficult to threaten the West without a delivery system that could lob a bomb across oceans. The Gulf War demonstrated that even a highly militarised third world regime like Saddam's Iraq lacked the technology to fire a big conventional shell at nearby



editor  
**mick hume**



Israel (remember the 'supergun' fiasco?). The much-hyped threat of Saddam's chemical warfare also fizzled out as his Soviet Scud missiles proved almost useless. Delivering an atomic bomb across the globe would pose much bigger problems.

Mention of Saddam should remind us of the real power relations between such regimes and the West. The total destruction of Iraq gave a glimpse of the force which the Western powers can marshal to put third world 'upstarts' in their place. It is crazy to imagine that the USA, with its massive military potential for non-nuclear violence (backed, even after George Bush's latest cuts, by 5000 nuclear warheads) could seriously be challenged by an Islamic ruler with a handful of crude nukes.

So how has the issue of the Islamic Bomb come to such prominence? Its construction by the USA and Britain began back in the summer of 1989. The Berlin Wall had crumbled and the Soviet Union didn't seem to be far behind it. In public, the Western authorities were celebrating victory in the Cold War. But in private, the US and British military establishments were seriously concerned. Without the Soviet Union, what justification could they have for maintaining Nato and their nuclear arsenals?

Politicians, generals, journalists and academics on both sides of the Atlantic launched a frantic search for new demons against which they could direct Western defence strategy. They came up with the loose idea of 'the threat of third world nationalism'. Margaret Thatcher, as usual in the forefront of right-wing politics, prefigured current discussions by arguing that Nato's nuclear umbrella was still needed to control 'countries in the Middle East with missile technology'.

Back then, however, the scare stories about third world nationalism sounded unconvincing. As a justification for the military budgets and deployments of the Western powers, they were certainly a poor substitute for the Soviet Union's two million troops and huge nuclear arsenal. Even the carefully manipulated image of Saddam Hussein as the new nuclear Hitler wasn't credible for long, once the US-led coalition had blasted Iraq off the map.

Now the Anglo-American propaganda campaign has finally come together, in the idea of an Islamic Bomb being built with the aid of ex-Soviets. There is no longer even much need for the Western powers to find hard evidence of missiles in a third world country. All the papers have to do is report sightings of men in white coats with funny

accents, in order to 'prove' that former Soviet scientists are now on the payroll of a Gadaffi or a Saddam.

For US and British militarists, the Islamic Bomb is the perfect issue to link the old Cold War era and the new age. It can give some substance to their crusade against the third world, by recreating scale models of the Red Army around the globe.

The alleged nuclear threat from the third world has already been used by George Bush,

international affairs, and Britain's role as America's sidekick. They may talk about the threat from the third world and the former Eastern bloc. But the reason they want to preserve a high military profile—and to monopolise nuclear weapons—is to maintain the old pecking order among the major capitalist nations. A secret Pentagon report, leaked to the press in January, argues that the USA should keep a 5000 warhead-strong nuclear arsenal aimed at 'every reasonable

## For US and British militarists, the Islamic Bomb is the perfect issue

to explain why he is not going further with defence cuts and is increasing expenditure on the Star Wars project, and by John Major, to justify why Britain is increasing its nuclear arsenal by buying Trident submarines. And we can be sure that this one will run and run. One top American politician recently had a vision of Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey and some former Soviet republics all going both nuclear and Islamic fundamentalist 'later in the decade'.

The renewed emphasis on the need for the West to maintain nuclear weapons is a response to a new challenge to the USA and Britain. The challenge comes not from the Islamic states of the third world, however, but from the rival industrialised nations of Germany and Japan.

From the moment the H-Bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ended the Second World War, nuclear weapons have been a symbol of American supremacy on Earth. The USA's allies, Britain and France, also got the Bomb and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, as a sort of deputy sheriff's badge.

Much has changed since 1945. The defeated powers of the Second World War have risen to be the economic giants of our time. Now military might, especially of the nuclear variety, is just about the only thing that the USA has over Germany and Japan—and just about all that Britain and France have to keep them at the top table of international affairs. This is why the old powers are so desperate to find a credible reason for retaining nukes.

The Islamic Bomb is a device constructed to prolong America's leading role in

adversary' on Earth. Why? In order to discourage Japan and Germany from developing the Bomb.

The short-term effectiveness of the Islamic Bomb as a diplomatic weapon was revealed in January at the first-ever summit of the United Nations Security Council, convened by Major to discuss the problem of post-Cold War nuclear proliferation. This stage-managed affair was a blatant attempt by Britain and America to refocus the West's attention away from Eastern Europe (where Germany holds the economic whip hand), and towards the 'threat' from the third world (where the USA can assert its military authority).

The Japanese used the occasion to suggest that, as the second largest contributor to the UN, they too should now have a seat on the Security Council. In response, the British exploded the Islamic Bomb. The Security Council wasn't for those with money, they said, it was for those with the will and the weaponry to defend the Free World. And in any case, argued one British newspaper, changing the Security Council to make it more globally representative would mean admitting a *Muslim* member—and that would be madness, wouldn't it?

The Security Council summit agreed a declaration with, noted Major, 'a hard cutting edge'—a pledge to use 'appropriate measures' against any state suspected of violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In the hands of the US and British authorities (who have already destroyed Iraq on the pretext of non-proliferation), the Islamic Bomb looks like posing a mortal threat to many more third world peoples.



# Letters

## Support Croatia?

Croatian supporter Attila Hoare is wrong to say that Lenin and Trotsky supported 'self-determination for every nation' (letters, February). For a start, they only supported the right of nations to self-determination, and did not treat that as an absolute principle. Lenin argued that national demands 'are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle' and that the working class must confine itself to 'the negative demand of the right to self-determination, without giving guarantees to any nation, and without undertaking to give anything at the expense of another nation'.

In the specific instance of Croatia, where the West is fostering ethnic strife to suit its own interests, Hoare would do well to read Trotsky's explanation for the Red Army's occupation of independent Georgia in 1921: 'Where the fiction of self-determination, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, becomes a weapon directed against the proletarian revolution, we have no occasion to treat this fiction differently from the other "principles" of democracy perverted by capitalism.'

In 1921, British and French imperialism were using independent Georgia as a launchpad to crush the Bolshevik revolution. In 1992, the West is again using the 'fiction' of self-determination to justify its intervention in the East.

**Andy Clarkson Hackney**

Attila Hoare should know better than to equate wartime Serbia with the Croatian NDH state (letters, February). Thanks to Hitler's generosity, the independent fascist NDH state comprised most of present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina plus parts of Serbia and Montenegro. What was left of Serbia (others also took chunks) became a German-occupied military zone.

Hoare equates the Chetniks, a stateless guerrilla movement, with the Ustashe who were an arm of a state. The Serb-led Chetniks initiated resistance to the Germans but were quickly put on the defensive protecting the Serbian peoples who were menaced by the occupying forces of Germany (and Austria), Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Italy and, worst of all, Croatia. The Ustashe, upon gaining power, embarked upon the massacre of Serb civilians. Their aim was to eliminate Serbs as a people within the NDH.

Hoare downplays Croatia's murky wartime

past claiming that the Ustashe hijacked the NDH state. This sits unhappily with the role of Archbishop Stepinac who was head of the Roman Catholic Church in the NDH. At no time did he publicly criticise those of his monks, priests and high-ranking churchmen who supported and, in some cases, were active members of the Ustashe.

Hoare pleads for the Croat people's right to self-determination but this is not disputed by the Serbs. At issue are appropriate sovereign borders for an independent Croatia. The Germans due to their wartime misdeeds lost 'German lands'. Why should an equally culpable Croatia be rewarded with 'Serbian lands'?

From a comfortable London vantage point Hoare emphasises the differences between the Serbs and Croats. This could be forgiven but for the fact that such a large proportion of the Serb and Croat peoples are geographically intermixed. Could Hoare be advocating transfers?

**Y Kovach Middlesex**

## Not Kristallnacht

Angela Hughes and Rob Knight use the term *Kristallnacht* to refer to the events of November 1938 as 'night of the shattering glass' ('Nazis are not the problem' and 'Don't mention the war?', January).

*Kristallnacht* means crystal night. It's obvious for anti-fascists that it wasn't a beautiful night when Jewish synagogues were burnt down and Jewish shop-owners were forced to hand over their businesses to so-called Aryan Germans. The increased use of the alternative words *Pogromnacht* or *Reichspogromnacht* is long overdue among the German left, and I hope English people find an alternative too (perhaps 'pogrom night').

Angela Hughes correctly recognises the British left's ignorance and even participation in immigration restrictions. However she concludes that British anti-racists would be better employed over here rather than tackling German problems. Her approach adopts the idea of the nation state she says she wants to destroy whereas, in fact, we are living in a world that is economically, politically and culturally interrelated. There is no use posing the British left's role against that of the German left—the point is to act in any part of the world where fascism exists. People in

Hamburg are active against the fascists in Munich. The British cannot escape from European integration.

**Armin Grambart-Mertens Manchester**

## The meaning of liberalism

What does James Heartfield mean by 'liberalism'? ('The end of liberalism', January). He suggests that a liberal thinker upholds reason against tradition, enquiry against faith and the hope of equality against submission. A useful starting point—but Heartfield's explanation raises more questions than answers.

Is it fair to call Hayek a liberal in 1944, when the tradition of classical liberalism to which he subscribed—*laissez-faire* capitalism—was long dead? Hayek yearned for the return to the good old days of progressive capitalism, which in the context of the decay of capitalism at the time, amounted to a backward-looking appeal to tradition with no liberal content at all. During the postwar period liberalism took on a new meaning, becoming the abstract moralism espoused by the *Guardian*. The modern emphasis is on state intervention to compensate for the inequalities resulting from the untrammelled operation of the market.

Hayek's economic liberalism is the same as the *Guardian*'s: both believe in the liberatory potential of capitalism. However we need to consider the forms that liberal ideas take and the contexts in which they are put forward, which must have some impact on how they are perceived at any given time. It seems that rather than Hayek moving from liberal to conservative ideas, it is the relationship between his ideas and the rest of society which has altered.

**Lynn Kelly Liverpool**

## Hillsborough: no justice

On 6 April 1989, 95 Liverpool fans were murdered at Hillsborough stadium—victims of the government's anti-hooligan hysteria and law and order drive. Today, the charade of justice is over. The police inquiry, Lord Justice Taylor, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Police Complaints Department have all shut their books on the case. The result—a big fat zero!

This privileged kind of treatment—British



justice—is usually reserved for the likes of Irish civil rights marchers or the Toxteth community. Its purpose is to let the culprits off the hook while accusing the victims for their own slaughter.

We are told to 'forgive and forget this tragic affair'. Yes, I'm sure they'd like us to forget the police lies about fans pissing on rescuers and picking the pockets of the dead, and forget the empty oxygen cylinders and non-existent medical equipment at the stadium. Most of all, to forget that the ruling class are guilty of callously murdering another 95 people and not a damn thing is going to be done about it.

**A Carter Glasgow**

## Animal instincts

I agree with Ann Bradley that it is childish and regressive to debase human emotions and characteristics by attributing them to animals ('Animal crackers', January). Humans are rational, independent of instinct and capable of free thought. Giving animals human characteristics suggests that animals are capable of being independent of instinct for which there is no scientific evidence.

Animals perceive the world differently to humans. The world of the animal is outside human consciousness and is therefore incomprehensible. For example, 'rape' in human terms is the act of forcing sexual intercourse. What the David Attenboroughs would describe as 'rape' by a male sealion may be perfectly natural—we don't know because we don't have the sealion's perspective. All we can do is look for patterns in animal behaviour and not muddy scientific analysis by immersing it in human terms.

**Steve Hodson London**

## Revising the Irish Rising

Mark Reilly's review of some of the prominent texts on Ireland provides an excellent perspective on the different strands to be found (Marxist Review of Books, February). He is correct to point out the intra-Ireland myopia and the development of the 'two nations' theory, which permeates almost all of the texts on Ireland over the last two decades and which now assumes the form of the wishful argument that European 'regionalisation' will facilitate the new (non-national) framework for Ireland's plurality.

Another trend though is maturing which seeks to overcome the problem of the essentially negative perceptions of 1916 that the revisionists have peddled for so long. By

rubbing 1916, they effectively leave no room for the development of the 'Twenty-Six County' nationalism which is necessary to trump the republicans. By tracing a direct continuum from Pearse to the Provos one is left with a moral vacuum where the 'Free State' should be. In order to overcome this problem, the Easter Rising is being resuscitated, but a firm line drawn between it and the Civil War.

This approach is most clearly articulated by Tom Garvin in his recent contribution to the Field Day collection 'Revising the Rising', where he locates the denial of democratic rights as the primary locus of interaction in the events leading to Easter week, and argues that '1916 accelerated the democratisation of Irish life'. Partition though is seen as 'inevitable', so therefore the inauguration of the Free State in 1922 is the nadir of the 'revolutionary' period, while the Civil War was 'foolish'.

Garvin's approach is not unique, but it is indicative of a wider desire to cohere a more general (and less particularist), credible alternative to the crass revisionism which treats 1916 as a pro-German *putsch* that only served to delay the inevitable and destroy 'constitutional nationalism', while bequeathing a legacy of anti-democratic extremism. Such, essentially Unionist, revisionism is obviously of limited utility in the South; as Seamus Deane notes in the same collection, 'the Easter Rising of 1916 has been so effectively revised that its seventy-fifth anniversary is a matter of official embarrassment'.

North and south, there are different agendas for legitimising the current impasse (and one should not underestimate the impact of the Anglo-Irish accord here). Both need to accept partition as 'just', but both need to formulate some coherent and positive History (with a capital H!) for their 'state'. Squaring that circle requires a vivid imagination.

**SB Belfast**

## Flavor Flav for president?

Emmanuel Oliver correctly points out that many young Americans express their alienation from the traditional values of American society through rap music ('Rap against the American Dream', January). But the ironic point is that rap music itself celebrates a particular version of America.

Black music was promoted as part of American culture to recapture disaffected urban populations. Today, rap doesn't reject Americanness—rappers from different minorities claim they are every bit as American and a lot more relevant than George Washington. The status quo has no more

ability to inspire young Americans. Even the banal utterances of Flavor Flav look momentous compared to George Bush's speeches.

**Kevin Young London**

## Bernard Manning and Benny Hill

I agree pretty much with Frank Cottrell-Boyce (February) on the question of comic revisionism. The old mainstream comedy did decline because it was awful, not because of the equally awful Ben Elton. Frank Cottrell-Boyce is also obviously right to ridicule the idea that a TV corporation like Thames would have dropped Benny Hill for so-called Politically Correct reasons (although I think he will find that *Beadle's About* is actually perpetrated by London Weekend Television, not Thames).

That said, however, I feel Frank Cottrell-Boyce goes too far by including among his targets Toby Banks' 'paean' to Bernard Manning in *Living Marxism* (December 1991). Unlike Benny Hill, Tarby and the rest of the true blue Brits, Manning is funny. Which is why his career didn't need to be artificially 'revived' by the revisionists; he has been doing very nicely all along.

Manning is also, of course, an obnoxious bastard and an utter racist. But surely that was the point of Toby Banks' (admittedly over-indulgent) article; not to celebrate Manning as a grand old British trouser, but to point out that, while Manning may make you want to throw up, he can also make you crease up at the same time. The remarkable thing is not that *Living Marxism* should publish such an opinion, but that it should cause such controversy.

As for the complaints about the Manning piece from Messrs Leslie and Boyton (letters, January), it must be wonderful to be able to stop yourself laughing at non-Marxist material.

**C Baker London**

## Oxygen of publicity

Michael Jackson does not buy oxygen tents. (Frank Cottrell-Boyce, January). All the gossip about him sleeping in oxygen chambers was actually started by him as a publicity stunt (see JR Taraborrelli, *The Magic and The Madness*, p432). I also noticed Macaulay Culkin's name is spelled wrongly as McCauley.

**Alex Tan Nottingham**

**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



# What's all the

A Benetton advertising campaign featuring newborn babies, Aids victims and black soldiers is the latest *bête noire* of British liberal opinion.

Jenny McLaren thinks people should put the posters in a bit of perspective

I hated Benetton adverts before you did. I hated it when they used those soppy photos of black and white children holding hands, and multi-coloured people covered in day-glo stripes being the 'United Colours of Benetton'.

I especially hated the people who liked Benetton adverts. I used to work with some of them at an aid agency. The type who think it's really good that lots of Africans are still 'so close to nature' (ie, subsisting as hunter-gatherers), live in homes 'perfectly adapted to the climate' (mud huts) and 'prefer' to use an abacus instead of those horrid disease-ridden computers. They are the patronising people in the gaily coloured jumpers (guaranteed not tested on animals) who saw Benetton's adverts as 'positive images' which could help to combat racism.

You are probably familiar with the theory. You see something wrong with the world and you want to put it right. So you put up lots of pictures showing things the way you would like them to be, and reality should follow. Sometime.

Now, however, many strands of liberal opinion seem to have decided that Benetton's images are not positive any more. They are up in arms about the latest advertising campaign.

Gay groups and Aids charities like the Terrence Higgins Trust have condemned Benetton's use of a picture of a man dying of Aids and his family. Feminists joined the many protests which got the company's posters of a newborn baby withdrawn. The Anti-Racist Alliance and *Black Briton* newspaper are campaigning for a boycott of Benetton over its use of allegedly racist images, such as a picture of an African soldier holding a bone and one which depicts a white child as an angel and a black child as a little devil.

## Selling jumpers

Why should a few pictures have this effect on people? Are Benetton adverts really worth all the fuss?

Marysia Wonorniecka, Benetton's British spokeswoman, has responded to the critics by claiming that the campaign is about raising social awareness. 'Rather than using their advertising budget merely to advertise the products', she says, Benetton 'wish to use it in a positive way. They are trying to break through a barrier of indifference and complacency'.

But of course Benetton aren't really into social consciousness-raising. They just want to raise our consciousness about Benetton jumpers. And they do

that by using striking images.

Oliviero Toscani was hired by Benetton in 1983 to breath some life into their ad campaigns. Benetton want to have the sort of advertising trademark that is as immediately recognisable as Coke's. I think he may have succeeded.

'Singlehandedly', says Toscani triumphantly, 'we have put the nose out of joint of the ailing advertising industry'. Asked what a newborn baby and a man dying of Aids have to do with jumpers, he replied: 'Absolutely nothing at all. All it does is make people look at the adverts.'

That is the job of every advertiser; to make us look at the adverts and remember the product. They all do this by exploiting the same sort of emotions as the Benetton ads; feelings about children, fears about sickness and death, and very often prejudice about race and sex.

## No big deal

The only difference is that Benetton goes in for shameless exploitation of these images, while most others opt for exploitation of a more polite variety. That's all. It's no big difference, no big deal.

And if we try to make a big deal out of Benetton adverts, who is likely to benefit? How will Aids victims benefit from this growing collective moral outrage? Are women with babies about to lead more liberated lives because some posters have been covered up?

Marc Wadsworth, national secretary of the Anti-Racist Alliance, is campaigning for a boycott because, he says, 'the way Benetton play with racist images leads to white people seeing black people as inferior'. That seems a daft argument. Whether the Benetton images do denigrate black people is a matter of interpretation—and either way, it is a matter of no consequence.

In a society where the law brands

PHOTO:  
covering up  
the 'offensive'  
Benetton  
baby

(Michael Kramer)



# fuss about?

immigrants as second class citizens before they set foot in the country, and where official racism is an everyday reality, nobody needs obscure images on advertising posters to make them believe that black people are inferior. Benetton's ads are no more causing racism than its previous penchant for 'positive images' led to an outbreak of internationalism.

It is about time that everybody cut out the Pavlovian reaction to Benetton's bit of carefully orchestrated provocation. How come people are so shockable these days that they cannot take the 'odd' picture in the 'wrong' place in their stride?

Just as Benetton 'singlehandedly' have put the nose out of joint of the

ailing advertising industry', so too have they singlehandedly disjointed the noses of everybody from the Pope and the Israeli government to the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Anti-Racist Alliance. That seems like strange company for these British liberals to find themselves in.

The Pope has tried to get a Benetton poster banned in Italy because he could not sleep at night for worrying that its 'offensive' image of a nun and a priest kissing would put ideas into holy heads. And the Israeli authorities have banned another Benetton advert because it featured a Palestinian boy with an Israeli boy whose money box contains US dollars.

The Benetton campaign does not

threaten the occupation of Palestine, nor does it cause illicit affairs in the Vatican (they have been going on for ages). But the knee-jerk reaction from the Pope and the Israeli government is to ban it anyway, because it offends their strait-laced sensibilities.

These are the sort of reactionaries I would expect to hear screaming for bans and boycotts over every little thing. It is a hallmark of their insecure pettiness and their tight-lipped, repressive psychology.

## The big cover-up

Such bigotry is what the Vatican City and the Zionist state are built upon. But there is no reason why the rest of us should adopt their narrowminded standards by launching crusades to censor and cover up every picture we might not like the look of. People who want to challenge chauvinism and prejudice can surely find better things to do with their time than going on about Benetton ads.

No doubt Benetton can be branded as a producer of crappy adverts and nasty woollens. But a major barrier to the emancipation of women, black people or gays in Britain? Come off it.



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# Fergie's royal flush



## Ann Bradley

It must be hard being a royal in the 1990s. In the good old days a bit of royal philandering was accepted as a perk of the job.

No one batted an eyelid when former Georges, Edwards and Charles whored, gambled and generally carried on in a manner unbefitting a head of church and state. Of course there was no gutter press to pay Nell Gwynne large sums to divulge how many inches Charles II had in his codpiece. But nobody in their right mind would have suggested that his royal dalliances undermined the monarchy. The king was the king for all that.

Yet today, all it needs to whip the press into a frenzy is a holiday snap of frumpy Fergie sitting on a garden swing with an eligible Texan bachelor. 'Palace rocked by depth of Fergie's friendship', warned *Today*; 'The Palace is concerned' declared the *Daily Mail*. Nobody so much as hinted that the dude's hand had been up the Duchess' skirt but the establishment is a bit jittery about the standing of the royals at present, and this latest 'controversial behaviour' touched a particularly raw nerve. It raised questions about Fergie's commitment to her husband and about her overall sense of discretion. Cavorting about with a rich, tasty American is not acceptable behaviour for today's British royal.

Despite being widely regarded as an anachronistic tourist attraction, the royal family play an important part in British life. At least they do as long as they are held in esteem. For the British middle classes, and part of the working class, the royals remain a symbol of 'what really matters' about the British way of life.

The royals are the living embodiment of three concepts which bind society together: the nation, the natural order, and the family. Of course, everyone is aware of the gap between this holy trinity and the reality of royal lives. The Queen may be a symbol of one united nation but she lives exclusively among an aristocratic elite. More people probably approve of the Queen because they think she's good for British tourism than believe she's appointed by God. And the idea that the royals are a model for family life is laughable. I'll bet Liz and Phil don't squabble over who does the washing up or the Saturday shopping. Fergie admits she spent only 42 nights with her husband in 1990, and *Daily Mail* readers are so intrigued at the separate lives of Charles and Di that the paper runs a 'Wales Watch' column.

But it's not what the royals do that counts, it's what they stand for.

*Sunday Telegraph* columnist Andrew Jay hit the nail on the head: 'In accepting the sovereign as Head of the Nation the people implicitly accept a national

and moral code. They may not follow it but they know when they are breaking it.' He argues that you could more or less define British moral standards by listing everything that the British public would be shocked or disappointed to find the royals doing, even if they habitually do the same things themselves. For example you'd expect to see the Queen at a race meeting, but you'd be shocked to find her in a casino or at a dog track.

Of course you could legitimately counter that it's precisely because horses are more respectable than dogs that the Queen can be found among them. But the three R's stand: 'Royals represent respectability'. So, while the majority of us commoners might have an affair before our fifth wedding anniversary, one doesn't expect it of a royal. And the fact that you don't expect it of a royal reinforces the fact that it's an unacceptable way to behave.

Hence when royals start behaving in an 'improper' manner, it's seen to undermine all that's decent. But, if the 'unacceptable behaviour' of past royals was openly tolerated—why is everyone so uptight about it now?

There's an element of blatant chauvinism. Fergie is not a George, an Edward or a Charles, she's a Sarah. And while a man is expected to sow a few discreet wild oats, it's not acceptable for a woman. I don't believe for one minute that Andrew spent the 323 nights of 1990 apart from his wife writing letters home. I doubt if anyone cares that much. But as the song says...it's different for girls.

In addition, Fergie's 'indiscretion' comes at a time when the family as an institution is under scrutiny. Think of the number of articles you've read about the breakdown of the family, the rise in divorce, illegitimacy and teenage pregnancy. In 1989 over a third of all marriages involved at least one partner who had been married before, and for every 1000 couples who were living together in holy matrimony, 12 were being split asunder by divorce. Is it not possible that the days when marriage was 'for as long as ye both shall live' are long gone? Now there's a frightening thought for the establishment. If the bedrock of the British family can be eroded, then nothing about British life is sacred.

Columnists in the established press are probably worried that the royals are setting an altogether bad example. Presumably Andrew Jay worries that if there's any hint that Fergie has a roving eye it will give women the length and breadth of the country the licence to hunt down stray American tycoons. I say good luck to them—I can't think of a worse example to set British women than being married to a berk like Prince Andrew.

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# Slump:

While the pre-election campaign has focused on rows over taxation and trivia, the British economy has been sinking into its most serious crisis since the thirties. Tessa Myer looks into the reasons why no mainstream party seems to have any substantial policies to offer the electorate

**R**ecession worst for 60 years', announced the *Guardian* front page on 3 February. The article reported leaked treasury figures which confirmed what *Living Marxism* has been arguing for months: that the current economic crisis in Britain is a full-blown slump, not just a cyclical recession.

According to the treasury figures cited by the *Guardian*, the British economy shrank by about 2.5 per cent last year—the steepest decline since the great Depression of the 1930s. Other reports from the Confederation of British Industry and the Bank of England soon confirmed the bleak state of British capitalism.

## Sense of panic

Even with all the devices the Tories have introduced to fiddle the figures, official unemployment has gone back over the 2.5m mark and is getting close to 10 per cent of the workforce. Almost every day brings fresh announcements of mass redundancies. Some of the big job-cuts are in old sectors like steel and coalmining, but most come from the growth sectors of the eighties—retailers like Rumbelows or relatively hi-tech manufacturers like British Aerospace.

Behind the scenes, there is a growing sense of panic within the

British establishment as the prospect of a sterling crisis or a major fall on the stock market looms larger.

There is no sign of a recovery—nor any reason to expect one. The all-important investment figures show that the gains of the much-hyped investment 'boom' of the late eighties have been wiped out in around 18 months. With profit levels falling, capitalists are not about to make major new investments. But without new investment in the economy, where is an upturn supposed to come from? The government says it expects a 'consumer-led' recovery. In other words, if only we would all do a bit more shopping while the sales are on, everything would be alright.

Such ridiculous economic forecasts cannot alter the dire state of the fundamental indicators. These all suggest the possibility that the British economy, far from picking up before the general election, could well continue 'bumping along the bottom' *right through the full term of the next government*.

After revealing how the government's own gloomy figures gave the lie to all the Tory talk of an upturn, the *Guardian* article made an equally telling point about the political repercussions of the slump. 'Treasury officials', it noted, 'are baffled that the

economy has not been the central political issue in recent weeks'. It is indeed remarkable that the worst economic slump that most people in this country have ever experienced has become something of a silent issue in the run-up to the election.

While the British economy has begun collapsing around their ears, the politicians of all parties have seemed preoccupied with other matters. Through January and February, the campaign became an endless round of trivia.

John Major and Neil Kinnock traded pantomime style 'Oh no I didn't... Oh yes you did' insults and called each other playground names. Newspapers and MPs invented smears and counter-smears involving everybody from the KGB to MI5. Paddy Ashdown's decidedly un-steamy indiscretions were paraded across the press. Rumours briefly surfaced that the party camps were each gunning for each others' 'first ladies', Norma Major and Glenys Kinnock. And pundits conducted in-depth analyses of how much prospective voters would be influenced by the clothes which politicians wore on television.

## Patience taxed

Things didn't improve much even when the discussion finally turned to matters of party policy, with the Tories wheeling out thrilling proposals for more motorway cafes and Labour unveiling a shock scheme for a register of private security firms.

Of course, the parties have had to discuss the economy. It is not possible entirely to ignore a slump which is adversely affecting every aspect of British life. But what has the economic debate centred on? Taxation; a deathly dull issue which is of marginal importance at the best of times has now been put forward by all sides as if it could provide a solution to an historic crisis.

The pre-budget tax rows have been heated, yet have only revealed the



# the silent issue



“Oh no  
I didn’t.”

“Oh yes  
you did.”

ILLUSTRATION: Grobrik



absence of any economic policies of substance in the major parties' programmes. At a time of mass unemployment, plummeting investment, falling profitability and huge trade gaps, it doesn't take an economics expert to work out that the precise level of income tax and VAT are pretty peripheral economic issues.

Not only has the economic debate been narrowed to the question of tax, but even here there is no genuine clash of alternatives. The various proposals to change tax levels amount to a difference of pennies. Tory chancellor Norman Lamont would like to manage a one penny reduction in income tax in the March budget. Roy Hattersley defends Labour's policy by asking 'who really believes that we would all be ruined if the rich were paid a penny less or the poor were paid a penny more' (*Guardian*, 7 January 1992).

Both parties are keeping their tax options open. Vagueness is the order of the day. Each party attacks the others by costing out possible taxation policies which might be adopted to meet supposed spending commitments at some unspecified point in the future. The press covers all of this in excruciating detail. After poring over the forecasts and graphs, it's easy to come away none the wiser.

### Apathy and inertia

The explosion of information on the minutiae of possible future tax policies seems irrelevant when contrasted with the scale of economic insecurity now confronting people in their daily lives. The Tories, Labour and the Liberal Democrats all talk of tinkering with income tax or VAT while British society comes apart at the seams. It is as if they were living in another world.

The tax rows, dirty tricks, sex stories and other pre-election trivia indicate how political campaigning in Britain is increasingly being separated from real political problems.

In these circumstances, it is little wonder that election fever seems to have infected only a narrow band of professional politicians and pundits. Most other people appear decidedly unmoved by the whole affair. Across much of the country, the prospect of the forthcoming electoral contest is greeted with apathy and cynicism. The inertia of political life has been accurately reflected in the inability of either main party to break away in the opinion polls.

It is easy to attack Major, Kinnock, Ashdown and the rest for their intellectual failure to come up with inspiring ideas or effective policies. Several mainstream newspapers have already expressed their disappointment at the dullness of the pre-election exchanges. But it is not simply a matter of inadequate individuals.

The problems of British politics are rooted much more deeply, in the shortcomings of the capitalist system.

Parties which aspire to manage the affairs of capitalism in Britain have to tailor their programmes to suit what is possible under that system. Their options are always constrained by the fact that the market economy exists to make private profits for capitalists. When profits are flowing, governments can sometimes afford more adventurous initiatives. But the reverse also applies. As falling profitability has made fewer things possible for British capitalists, so the parties that support them have been less and less able to produce policies which amount to much.

### Policy exhaustion

The Tories and Labour have been working their way downwards towards the current state of policy exhaustion for something like 20 years. The arrival of a long-term British economic crisis in the early seventies led to the discrediting of the dominant Labourist emphasis on state intervention in the economy. In the eighties, the Tories' market-oriented approach held sway, with high-profile privatisations and a flood of credit-fuelled financial speculation. Now that approach too has been exhausted, as the superficial 'miracle' of the Thatcher years is exposed and the underlying weakness of British capitalism asserts itself.

This is why none of the main parties can propose anything more innovative than a bit of fiddling with the taxation structure. All are bound by the stagnant state of the market economy. The Labour Party's difficulties in the pre-election debates demonstrate the problem.

Each time Labour seeks to propose a new policy, the Tories, the City and the media remind Kinnock's team of the constraints within which financially respectable parties must operate today. Labour's typical response is to backtrack on its commitments.

### 'Prawn cocktail'

The Labour Party has long promised that if elected it would make Britain a 'fairer society'. But as the slump has deepened and the Tories have turned on the pressure, Labour has effectively conceded that public spending is now an offence against the markets.

After his 'prawn cocktail offensive' to win friends among the big financiers over lunch in the City, shadow chancellor John Smith now says that Labour's only definite pledges were to raise pensions and child benefits a bit, and that his spending plans would depend 'on what was coming into the coffers through increased economic growth' (*Guardian*, 7 January). In other words, Labour accepts that making business profitable takes precedence

over all else, and measuring 'fairness' must come a poor second to counting what is in 'the coffers'.

At precisely the time when the slump creates an urgent need for more resources to be invested in health, housing and many other areas of society, the dictates of the market economy mean that public spending has acquired the status of a deadly sin. Even Labour commentator Hugh Macpherson has noted how, on being asked whether Labour's policies would involve any redistribution of wealth, shadow minister Margaret Beckett 'dissembled like a Victorian lady being asked if she harboured impure thoughts' (*Tribune*, 10 January 1992).

The condition of the British economy ensures that none of the mainstream parties can produce an inspiring programme. But it also ensures that whoever wins the election will have to preside over more harsh measures designed to make capitalism profitable, by cutting jobs, wages and welfare spending.

There is a tendency for the greyness of Major, Kinnock and Ashdown to be mistaken for decency and moderation. Since none of them says anything exciting or controversial, many people assume that they must all be harmless enough. That is a dangerous misconception. There is really no 'moderate' way to manage a capitalist economy in such a serious crisis as the current one.

### Worse to come

For sometime now, Labour has tried to use the example of chancellor Helmut Kohl's Germany against the Tories, to show how a conservative government can rule in a non-confrontational fashion. Today, however, the German government and employers are beginning an offensive to break the trade unions and beat down wages.

A capitalist powerhouse like Germany with a long tradition of social consensus cannot survive the economic crisis without attacking working class living standards. In which case, a worn-out economy like Britain's is certain to require far more drastic measures to get through the slump. Alongside soaring unemployment, wage settlements in Britain are already at their lowest for 20 years, with worse to come. These are the big issues affecting people's lives. Yet they hardly seem to impinge upon the election campaign.

Whether the final result of this year's general election turns out to be another Tory victory, a hung parliament or whatever, it will make little difference to the drift of government policy. It seems a safe bet that the majority of people in Britain will be facing much bigger problems than a penny or two on income tax or VAT. ●



# How the Daily Mail mugged Labour



Tessa Myer thinks that the Labour Party has left itself open to being abused by the Tory press

Daily doses of dirt characterise the media's election coverage. Fabricated stories masquerade as 'truths' and impartial news updates. The *Daily Mail* has been the most obvious publicity arm of Conservative Party Central Office.

The *Mail* group's contacts with the Tory Party put it in a prime position to 'out-smear' many of the competing tabloids, and often to act as originator of the latest election story.

Unashamedly biased, the *Mail on Sunday* ridicules John Prescott, shadow transport secretary, because he has impeccable working class credentials and 'worse still, he's not one iota ashamed of them' (2 February 1992). In the same issue, John Major is praised for his Citizen's Charter, under the headline, 'Fanfare for the common man'.

## Privileged leaks

The *Mail* will dutifully publish Tory press releases as privileged 'leaked information'. When opinion polls show Labour slightly ahead, the *Daily Mail* chooses instead to highlight the results of secret surveys 'conducted on behalf of Tory Central Office' (12 January). For the *Mail* men, if it carries the Conservative Party Central Office stamp it must be the truth.

'Exclusives' like a recent education leak illustrate this cosy relationship. The story headlined '£3m plan to end reading scandal' (*Daily Mail*, 3 February) was set up by the Tories to ensure that an education plan by Professor Maria Clay would be credited to the government. The *Mail's* 'Comment' claimed that 'Labour's education shadow minister Jack Straw, who got wind of this plan, was apparently about to spoil a government announcement about it by putting forward the proposal as his own'. Labour announced its latest education policy the following day, containing the identical reading scheme developed by Clay. Having got its own 'spoiler' in first, the *Mail* congratulated itself on breaking 'the stories that matter'.

The constant resort to inventing smears

demonstrates the poverty of Tory ideas. In the first six weeks of 1992, the *Daily Mail* devoted more front pages to attacking Labour than to anything positive about the Tories. The attempts it did make to celebrate government plans fell rather flat. 'Back to golden age of trains', on Major's cheapskate plans to privatise British Rail, is hardly a front page headline to excite commuting *Mail* readers (8 January).

## 'A conspiracy'

Labour supporters often blame the media for all of the problems which their party has in making a dramatic impression in the opinion polls. Labour has been hounded by tabloids and 'qualities' from the *Sun* to the *Sunday Times*. Roy Hattersley, deputy leader of the Labour Party talks of a 'conspiracy' between the *Daily Mail* and the Tory Party claiming that 'if there are lies it's because the Tory newspapers repeated it' (*Newsnight*, 23 January).

In fact, the main reason why the media appears powerful enough to disable the Labour Party is the reaction which press attacks usually illicit from opposition spokesmen themselves.

It would seem obvious that many of the recent smear stories about the Labour Party in the press are artificial or wildly inflated. Even some Tory MPs admitted the exaggerated nature of the tax 'truths' published about Labour policy. Few people would be taken in by such tales simply because they are published in the *Mail*. What can lend smears some credibility, however, is Labour's defensive response to them.

## Backing off

In their desperate attempts to appear morally moderate and financially respectable, the leaders of Kinnock's new-look Labour Party seem to have adopted a permanently defensive attitude. If the *Mail* accuses them of anything at all, they will deny it in detail. Instead of rejecting the *Mail's* values and refusing to be judged by the standards of the Tory tabloids, Labour tends to enter into a debate on the *Mail's* terms. The damaging impression created

by this defensive posture is that Labour is continually in retreat, backing off from its policies.

Typical of Labour's response has been its reaction to the *Daily Mail's* tax attack.

One front page after another has been devoted to an attack on Labour's tax policy. First it was 'Labour tax plan shambles' (16 January), then 'Kinnock snared by his own tax trap' (17 January), followed by 'Labour's part-time tax shock' (20 January) and then the big one, 'Labour split on tax plans' (23 January)—backed by a double page spread on 'Labour's big pension con trick'.

The assault threw Labour into disarray and sent it back-peddalling fast from its own modest proposals. Labour leaders assured the media that their proposal to lift the 9 per cent ceiling on National Insurance contributions would be phased in gradually, that nobody earning less than £21 000 a year would pay more NI under Labour, that they would not raise income tax for most people, etc.

## Dirty war

On the day of the *Mail's* made-up story about a Labour split, Roy Hattersley withdrew from any commitment at all by saying 'the proposals are for the chancellor when he becomes chancellor in 12 weeks time' (*Newsnight*, 23 January). The *Daily Mail* smugly headlined its front page 'Labour on run over tax' (25 January), and announced itself 'delighted that the Labour Party is to spell out exactly what its tax plans are'. It seemed as if Labour had withdrawn parts of its policy which the *Daily Mail* found offensive.

The intensity of the current dirty war against Labour in the press is probably unprecedented. It shows that the only way the Tories can win this election is by discrediting the opposition rather than selling themselves positively. But Labour leaders have laid themselves open to being mugged by the media. If you allow the Tory central office smear machine and the *Daily Mail* to dictate the electoral agenda, you are asking for everything you get. ●



The issue of Scotland's place within the United Kingdom has become big news this year. Yet there is little sign of a popular nationalist movement demanding Scottish independence. Kirk Williams examines what's really behind the new turn of events

**A**t the heart of the debate now raging about Scottish nationalism there is an irony which few here have commented upon: at a time when Scotland is supposed to be experiencing a nationalist upsurge and a cultural revival, popular struggles over social issues in Scotland are at an all-time low.

Perhaps the clearest example of the gap between words and action came in January, with the announcement by British Steel that its Ravenscraig works was to close. Ravenscraig has long been considered an important symbol of Scotland's industrial traditions and national pride, and Scottish politicians of all parties had sworn to defend it. Yet when the closure announcement finally came, the reaction was muted. Opposition MPs said it was a 'betrayal', union officials wept on TV, but nobody put up a fight.

### Passive demand

It is much the same story on other social issues in Scotland today. Even the anti-poll tax campaign has passed quietly away. Foreign observers coming to Scotland fresh from Eastern Europe have noted the peculiarly passive character of the demand for Scottish independence, which takes place, as the German paper *Die Zeit* put it, 'without...mass demonstrations, without pressure from the

street and the threat of disorder' (quoted in *Independent on Sunday*, 9 February 1992).

Opinion polls which show between 30 and 50 per cent of Scots supporting independence have been widely publicised; it is less well known that the same polls show Scottish independence some way down the list of people's concerns, well below issues like jobs or the NHS. There is a sizeable pool of private support for independence, but the intense constitutional debate among politicians is not yet matched by a mood of real public excitement.

What is clearly not happening in Scotland is any sort of popular struggle to transform the way that society is run. So what is going on? How can we explain the approach of a possible constitutional crisis?

### British disease

The origins of the crisis stem more from a general malaise in Britain than a nationalist rising in Scotland. Britain now looks increasingly like a dead-end society. Among young people especially, there is a growing disaffection with the traditional British way of life and an alienation from the established political process. The impact of these trends can be seen in many small ways, from the difficulty which the establishment now has in raising money for royal monuments, to the widely expressed fears about high rates of abstention in the coming general election.

In Scotland such alienation has acquired the form of a sense of difference, of 'Scottishness'. But this sense of Scottishness is the negative product of estrangement from the idea of being British, rather than a positive endorsement of the programme of Scottish nationalism.

Many Scottish people feel bitterly let down by the Westminster parliament and its parties, which have presided over the economic and social decline of recent years. The Tories, who now have just nine out of the 72 Scottish MPs, are almost entirely discredited. The Labour Party, in many ways the political establishment north of the border, has also disenchanted Scots through its

ineffective opposition to Thatcher and Major, and its complicity in implementing Tory policies like the poll tax.

There has been a widespread loss of belief in the old British parties and institutions. As the Ravenscraig episode illustrates, however, there is also a lack of any dynamic opposition movement in Scotland. With no alternative solution on offer, many more Scottish people are endorsing the idea of independence as an untried option; but so far only as a privatised protest to be registered in an opinion poll.

### Support band

Young Scots are even more alienated from the burned-out remains of British society. Yet here too, the predominant sentiment is political passivity. Their rejection of what they see as 'Britishness' is still much more likely to be reflected in support for a band like Runrig than in active support for any policies of the Scottish National Party (SNP).

To say that the current situation results from the weakness of identification with Britain rather than the strength of Scottish nationalism may be controversial. But even that does not go far enough. Far from being due to specific national feeling, developments in Scotland are part of a much wider *international* pattern of social fragmentation.

### Bonds breaking

The end of the long Cold War era has opened a new age in world history and called old loyalties into question. The Soviet bloc has collapsed, and the Western Alliance is riven by fresh tensions. With the disappearance of the Cold War politics which imposed coherence on societies East and West, many individual nations are also in danger of cracking up.

This is clearest in the East, where the ex-Soviet bloc is splitting and re-splitting into new republics, regions and statelets. But in the West too, it has become clear that there is little to hold capitalist societies together.

The unified existence of developed EC member states like Belgium and

# What is not happening in



Italy has already been called into question, as parochial and particularist interests come to the fore. There is no reason to imagine that Britain—and within it, Scotland—could remain immune to these global shifts.

Everywhere from the former Soviet Union to the USA, the old bonds which held societies together over past decades are loosening or breaking altogether. As yet, however, no strong new bonds have developed. The consequence is an international and national loss of cohesion, of which the renewed call for Scotland to separate from the rest of the UK is but one reflection.

**Losing touch**

As the independence debate has intensified, a lot of attention has been focused on the role of the Scottish National Party. But if the Scottish situation is understood in context, as a consequence of wider trends, it suggests that the SNP can have only a limited ability to progress of its own volition. The party which could explode the situation however

(probably to the benefit of the SNP), is the Tories.

The government's handling of the Scottish issue to date demonstrates that the Conservative Party is perfectly capable of creating a constitutional crisis. The exhaustion of the Tories' political programme has led to a loss of direction on everything from the economy to education. Perhaps more than any other issue, the Scottish debate has exposed the Tories' loss of touch and lack of control today.

**Explosive mixture**

The Scottish Office, under Tory minister Ian Lang, has sought to polarise the issue in the run-up to the election, by insisting that there is a straight choice between the Union as it exists and Scottish independence. The result has been to raise the stakes, boost the SNP's poll ratings, and spread even more panic in Tory Party ranks. It is an explosive mixture, and the final outcome remains uncertain.

Sections of the establishment have taken panic measures to try to cover every eventuality. Old Stalinists in the

Ukraine recently converted themselves into leading nationalists in order to cope with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In a similar fashion, some Tories, prominent businessmen and newspapers are now trying to project a more Scottish profile, in a bid to help them manage any further moves towards devolution or independence.

The Scottish version of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* has flown the highest such kite so far. In January it gave over its entire front page to the declaration 'Rise now and be a nation again'—making it the first national newspaper in Britain to declare support for full Scottish independence.

**Anything goes**

No doubt this was a typically cynical bid to boost circulation rather than a heartfelt political choice; the English edition of the paper simultaneously backed the decision to close Ravenscraig. But if even the *Sun* can desert the Conservatives, it suggests that anything is possible, as the old arrangements start to unravel around the world.

The nationalist sentiment now reflected in the Scottish *Sun* was not matched by action over the closure of Ravenscraig (below right)

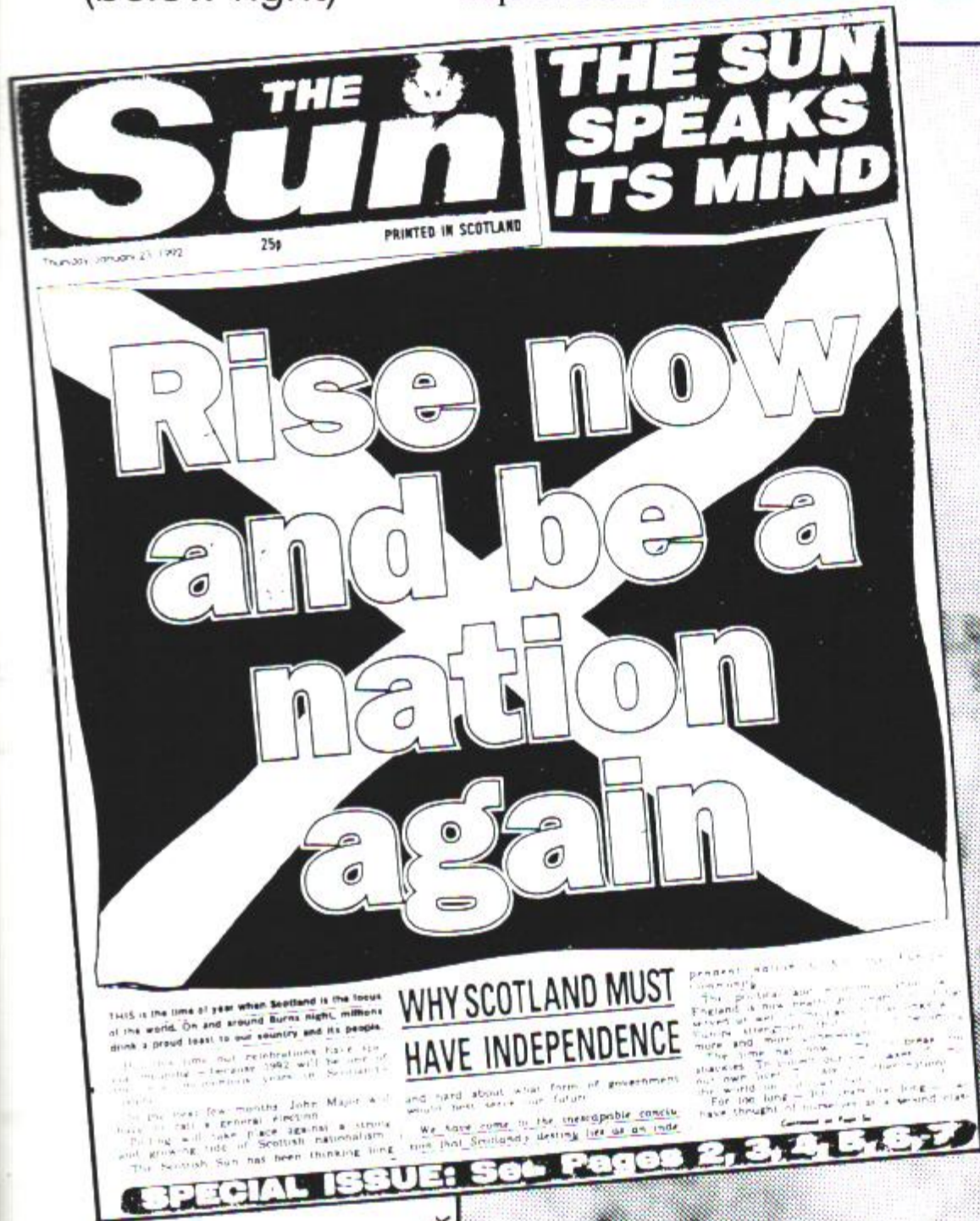
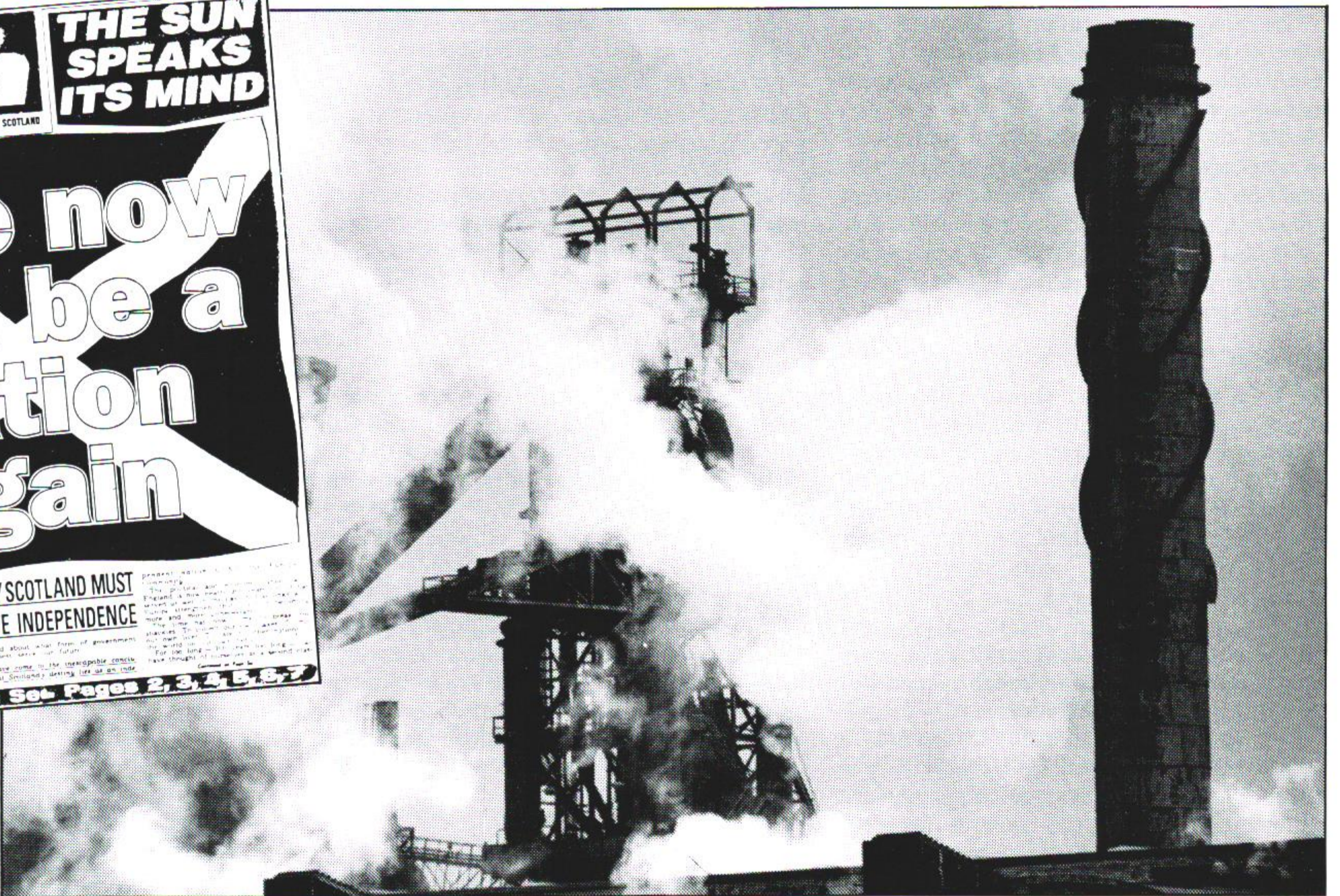


PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



# Scotland



# A classic deception

Mark Reilly on what's behind the new emphasis on the 'Western cultural tradition' in music education

A new round in the education debate began in January with reports from two working parties on the teaching of art and music in schools. Both recommended a continuation of the existing practice, that no one culture should dominate the curriculum. The working party on music, which included experts like Sir John Manduell, principal of the Royal Northern College of Music, and the man who wrote the Wombles' song, recommended that children continue to study rock, reggae and other ethnic music and even football songs. The even-handed working party also threw in a piece by Mozart.

The National Curriculum Council (NCC), under its new chairman, BP executive David Pascall, threw out the proposals and suggested instead a return to what is known as the 'Western cultural tradition'. Pascall put forward the rather ambitious proposal that five-year olds should be able to distinguish between different composers, and that 11-year olds should be able to discuss the intricacies of a Bach fugue. Education secretary Kenneth Clarke backed Pascall's views.

## Ulterior motives

The NCC's ideas sound laudable at first. It would be a fine thing if more people were familiar with classical music, could recite poetry at will and give a good account of themselves in an appreciation of fine art. However the sheer impracticality of the whole scheme suggests that matters other than educational prompted such a sharp attack on the working parties. The debate about the restoration of the classical tradition is more about a restoration of traditional values than any concern for artistic excellence.

Even in purely educational terms the NCC's proposals make little sense. Both Clarke and Pascall know that the average comprehensive school cannot provide the resources to teach such subjects with any level of sophistication. The great merit for the authorities of the 'progressive' approach is that children know the rock, reggae and football songs already, so it is taxing on neither child nor teacher. It is also cheap. One steel band can provide for a whole school if rostered efficiently. To teach classical music properly in every school would require a huge number of qualified staff—at a time when government spending restraints have already left schools short of teachers. And if any practical instruction was involved, it would soon blow the budget of the best-run comprehensive. Violins aren't ten-a-penny. Th

NCC must also be aware that force-feeding children classical music, especially on the cheap, will turn them off it. Most children, and many adults, regard the classics as music for toffs. Unless you are brought up in a wealthy home, classical refinement seems too much at odds with your experience of everydaylife. The natural tendency is to rebel against it and treat it with derision. I remember my own experience of teachers taking sudden proselytising fits trying to temper our savagery, and inflicting the 1812 Overture on us (shows how much they knew). We thought Slade were the men for the job. Both sides lost.

So why suggest something so impractical? My suspicions are aroused by the terms used, especially the idea of promoting the 'Western cultural tradition'.

## Mythical tradition

In musical terms, Western culture seems a mystifying notion. For example, the National Curriculum Council includes people like Scott Joplin, Fats Waller and even Lennon and McCartney in the category. What do Fats Waller and Palestrina have in common other than that both wrote music? And doesn't much of so-called ethnic art and music, with its attempt to define an exclusive culture-spirit, have an intellectual affinity with the work, say, of Wagner, one of the central figures of the Western tradition? The link is at least as noteworthy as any formal closeness Wagner might have with Mozart's rational order.

The renewed emphasis on the 'Western cultural tradition' clearly has little or nothing to do with the practicalities of teaching music. It looks rather more like a part of the conservative crusade to create a British and wider Western identity which glorifies a mythical tradition and looks to the past, at a time when the future seems increasingly uncertain.

## Fragmenting societies

Lesley Garner, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, fears for the future of the classics. 'The music of Mozart, like the words of Shakespeare, is one of the threads that still tie our culture together.' Garner need not fear for Mozart and Shakespeare. They are the highest achievements of human endeavour in their respective fields and are not about to be upstaged by reggae and football songs. For Garner, however, Mozart and Shakespeare are merely 'threads' of a culture that she hopes can tie together the fragmenting societies of the West—particularly Britain.

Garner justifies teaching the European tradition to children of non-European background as a way of selling traditional Western values: 'If we deny that chance to be part of an extraordinary artistic tradition to the other ethnic groups of our society we are effectively excluding them from the best of what we, as a culture, have to offer.' By (falsely) associating contemporary British society with the universal traditions of the European enlightenment, Garner no doubt hopes that some of its radiance will reflect. The purpose of promoting Western culture in this way is to make Western society look noble and right and everybody else, especially the third world, mean and self-obsessed.

## Tory impasse

It says a lot for the vacuity of Tory politics that the government should try to make something out of such an issue. With no positive policies to offer for today, the Tories are reduced to portraying themselves as the party of classical tradition, of Mozart and Gainsborough. It seems unlikely to stir the masses.

The debate on Western culture has nothing to do with the education of schoolchildren. In practice, things will probably carry on much as before, as Kenneth Clarke effectively conceded when he backtracked somewhat on the original proposals for teaching classical music. The boys in Eton and Harrow will continue to study their musical scores, as befits those whose destiny it is to be makers of policy. For the rest it is likely to be the same old steel bands or nothing at all. ●

The invented Western tradition covers everybody from Wagner (below) to Fats Waller





# The price of butter

So far this winter, three pensioners have died of hypothermia contracted while queuing for their free packet of EC butter. With an election imminent, Her Majesty's opposition will surely have to make an issue of this disgraceful state of affairs.

Of late, Labour has challenged the government in areas the Tories consider their own. When the Tories caned the 'trendy teachers', nineties Labour hit back with its own 'parents' charter' promising early bedtimes for kids and classrooms full of books without pictures. When the government moved to crack down on squatters, they probably anticipated a Labour outcry about the rundown of council housing stock. Instead, Labour MP Joe Ashton denounced 'this rich man's bill' which would protect big houses in Knightsbridge while doing nothing for ordinary communities besieged by Gypsies. Shadow minister Kevin McNamara's trenchant defence of Peter 'Clementine' Brooke after his televised error of judgement managed to outdo the Tory backbenchers, and had Unionists fondly remembering the days of Roy 'Butcher' Mason.

Back to the three pensioners. Which party is going to grasp the nettle? In the Commons there were a few half-hearted protests about the indignity of people who had been through the war having to end their days queuing for food rations, but nobody really felt the issue to be worth pursuing. The government probably preferred to let the matter drop, in case it stirred up debate about the Christmas pension bonus (still £10—that's worth nearly ten bob in the old money). As it turned out, they needn't have worried, because Labour was not disposed to make an issue of it either. Gerald Kaufman understandably preferred to save his indignation for those Labour voters who proudly fought in more recent wars in the Falklands and the Gulf, and who now face redundancy and hardship on civvy street thanks to the new defence cuts.

Whatever the merits of handouts for pensioners, there are surely other serious issues that arise from the affair.

First, and most obvious, is the question of what happened to the three unclaimed packets of butter. Do the authorities know? With daily news bulletins reminding us of the thriving black market in Eastern Europe, it is extraordinary that no emergency measures have been passed to close this loophole. The government's swift action against joyriders shows that, when a crisis demands it, MPs of all shades will put aside their petty differences and ensure a swift passage for urgent legislation.

Surely a simple measure, such as drying EC surplus food stocks green, would enable the security forces to locate any misappropriated rations? Those basically honest old folk who may be tempted to

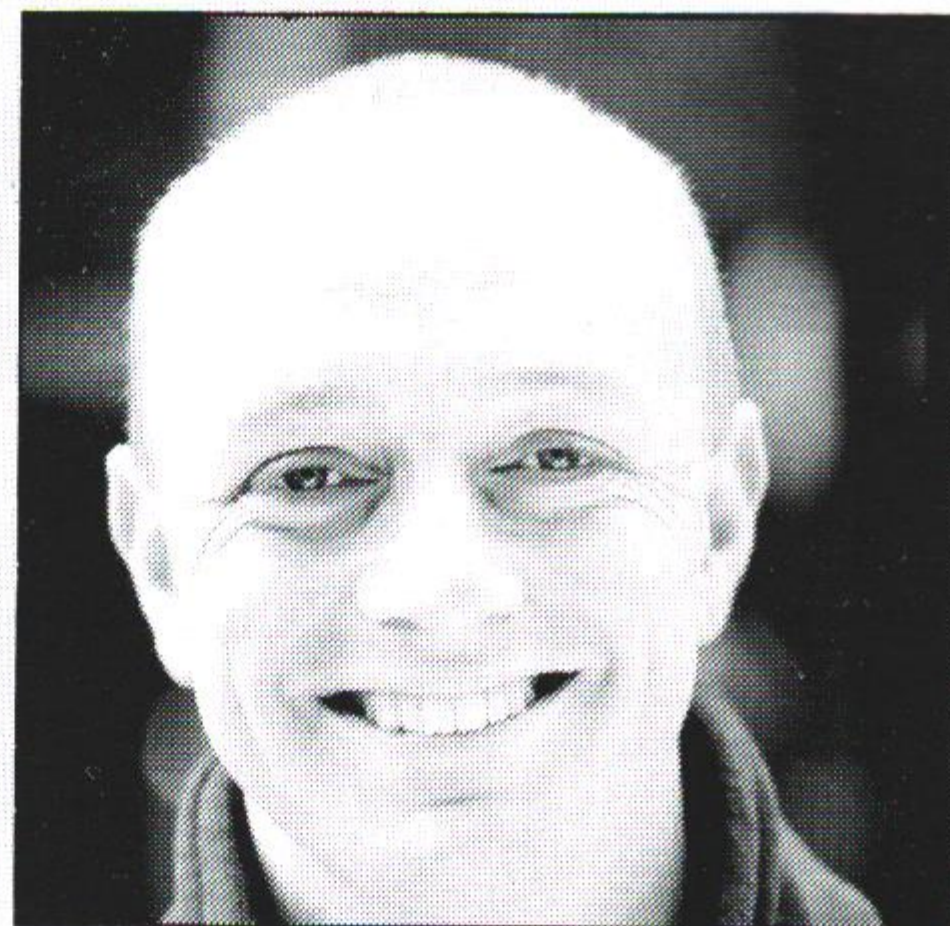
'borrow' a neighbour's pension book and queue twice (or three times) would think again before obtaining extra rations by deception. As for the hardcore criminals—who exist in the elderly community as they do elsewhere—a few exemplary sentences for those implicated in big-time rackets should deal with them.

A second aspect is more serious. Aside from the cases mentioned above, there is the national scandal of thousands of pensioners dying of hypothermia, alone—Britain has the highest death toll in the EC. Most are not found until days after death. How many people discovering a body in such circumstances would have the presence of mind to look for the deceased's passport and deliver it safely to a police station? Yet recent correspondence in the press has revealed widespread concern about the ease with which 'terrorists' acquire stolen passports. Senior politicians have an extremely complacent attitude to these deaths. They prefer to believe that most pensioners do not have passports, despite evidence that old people are travelling abroad more than ever. Barclays Bank even has an advertisement offering financial assistance to old servicemen wishing to attend war reunions on the Continent.

Junior health minister Virginia Bottomley is currently 'looking into' the Buxton Chair—a restraining device used in nursing homes. Pensioners are strapped in 'for their own protection', a practice described as 'barbaric' and 'belonging to the nineteenth century'. A tabloid paper is running a campaign to have it banned. My own hunch is that Mrs Bottomley has other intentions.

For a start, the government is generally in favour of all things nineteenth century. As for the 'barbaric' aspect, last month's House of Lords debate on instruments of torture showed the official approach to be pragmatic. Discussion focused on a prisoner who had been shackled with leg irons in an African jail. The leg irons had been manufactured by a respected firm in Birmingham, and their lordships were at pains to point out that the company could not be held responsible for what customers did with its products. It was argued that a corset becomes a torture implement when done up too tight, but that nobody would ban corsets.

When pressed on the matter, the pro-leg iron lords could not think of a use for them other than coercion. However, they reassured the House that this country is in line with European legislation because since 1983 it has been illegal in Britain to manufacture these items for export. At the end of the debate someone remarked that since leg irons are still manufactured and sold quite legally on the domestic market, perhaps the ban should be extended to the UK. But the matter was left there.



## Toby Banks

### The government is generally in favour of all things nineteenth century

The conclusion was clear: British society is mature enough to accept that restraint and even coercion can be necessary. Viewed from this perspective, the future of the Buxton Chair Company looks more promising. As a nurse from a Maidstone old people's home said: 'They are horrible, but they do serve a purpose.'

Peter Brooke never tires of telling those people who call for internment in Ireland that surprise is of the essence. Could it be that, under cover of seemingly unrelated debates, the Tories are laying the ground for an audacious pre-election initiative—the mass internment and Buxton Chairing of 'at risk' passport-holding pensioners living in unheated accommodation?

It would be risky. Many of those rounded up would be Tory supporters, familiar with their rights to postal votes. They may well vote for Paddy Ashdown as a protest. Perhaps a Buxton Deluxe could be used in marginal constituencies, with a 'cheap and cheerful' model for the rest. RAF hangars would be an ideal economical site for accommodation.

Of course it is a shame that many people would be deprived of the comfort of dying in the reassuring surroundings of their own home. But any extra deaths resulting from this measure—and there would be many—would be considered by most responsible politicians to be a price worth paying to close down another avenue of escape for the real enemies of freedom.



# A very British

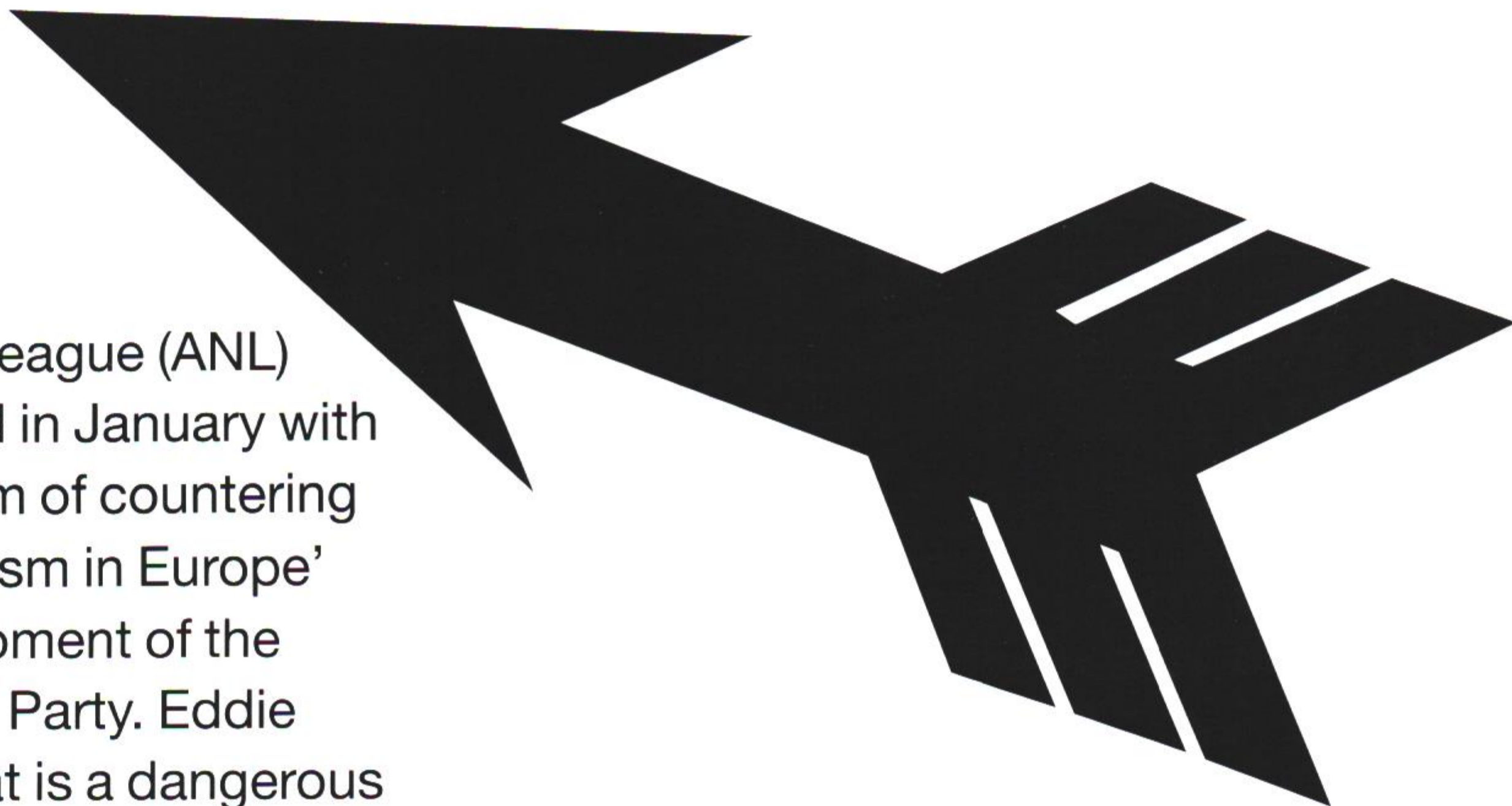
The Anti-Nazi League (ANL) was relaunched in January with the declared aim of countering 'the rise of Nazism in Europe' and the regroupment of the British National Party. Eddie Veale thinks that is a dangerous starting point for anti-racists. Kenan Malik asks what the ANL achieved in the seventies

**E**ven before the Anti-Nazi League had been formally relaunched, it was embroiled in a bitter row with another umbrella campaign, the Anti-Racist Alliance. It was less a debate over political strategy than a dispute over who held the franchise on celebrity sponsors. Both sides seem to agree on the need for an ANL-style campaign today; but the Anti-Racist Alliance wants to create a sort of Anti-Nazi League without the Socialist Workers Party.

This debate has pretty well missed the point. No matter who is behind the ANL, its anti-Nazi politics are a liability.

Why relaunch a campaign like the ANL today? It is one thing for anti-racists in Britain to declare opposition to the far-right on the Continent. But what practical steps can the Anti-Nazi League take to combat it from over here? ANL front man Peter Hain, an MP on the soft left of Kinnock's respectable Labour Party, seems unlikely to launch an International Brigade to beat up fascists on the streets of Paris and Berlin.

Within Britain, the ANL has had a hard job identifying a fascist threat. Its



## Myths of the

# ANL

**The prestige of the relaunched Anti-Nazi League rests almost entirely on the reputation of the original ANL as a mass anti-fascist movement which defeated the National Front in the seventies. Let's look at these claims more closely**



# h institution

notion of a possible British National Party (BNP) resurgence as the domestic face of 'Euro-Nazism' is somewhat far-fetched at a time when the BNP seems unable to get an overseas speaker to address its AGM, and when the party's Midlands organiser attracts 71 votes in a Leicestershire county council election (*Searchlight*, December 1991).

The ANL's relaunch literature includes a slim catalogue of British Nazi sympathisers. Topping the list are one Gregory Lauder-Frost, operations manager for Riverside Health Authority in West London, and one Sam Swerling, lecturer in law at the City of London Polytechnic. These two may not be the ideal house guests. But they are hardly a major cause of racist oppression today.

Those concerned about racism could surely find plenty to occupy them in

British society in 1992 without needing to look for Nazis abroad or to invent a fascist threat at home.

The relaunch of the Anti-Nazi League seems to have a lot less to do with a rising threat of fascism in Britain than with the decline of the old British left. The defeat of Labourism in the eighties, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and world Stalinism, has badly demoralised and disoriented most of the left. The consequences can be seen in various ways, from the closure of *Marxism Today* to the recent split in the Militant Tendency.

The relaunch of the ANL looks like another consequence of the same trend. It is primarily an attempt by the Socialist Workers Party and its allies to deal with the problem of intensified isolation by building a bridge to a broader audience. They have sought to solve a new problem by re-running the

past, and recreating the seventies campaign which is seen as their finest hour.

In fact, it is not possible to recreate the Anti-Nazi League of the seventies, with its big marches and bigger music carnivals. The official labour movement on which the ANL relied back then no longer exists as a campaigning organisation that could mobilise thousands of supporters. And Labour Party figures like Neil Kinnock, leading sponsors of the seventies ANL, have since moved well into the moderate centre ground of politics.

The Anti-Nazi League *can* still find a point of contact with mainstream politics in the nineties; but only in a way that poses a serious problem for anti-racists. However worthy the intentions, the ANL's narrow focus on the alien threat of 'Nazism' will serve to reinforce the little Englander outlook

The old ANL was fronted by Peter Hain (centre) and backed by Neil Kinnock (third from right)



PHOTO: Press Association

## 'The ANL was a mass anti-fascist movement'

The ANL certainly attracted tens of thousands to its anti-fascist carnivals. But it was less a mass anti-fascist movement than a lobbyist for the Labour Party in the 1979 general election.

The ANL was set up because left-wing activists were worried that the far right was taking votes away from the Labour Party. In 1976 the National Party won two council seats in Blackburn at the expense of Labour while the National Front (NF) polled 119 000 in the GLC elections, making gains particularly in Labour strongholds.

The Labour Party responded in two ways. The Labour government adapted to the racist climate—introducing, for example, the 1977 green paper on nationality which the Tories later turned

into the 1981 Nationality Act. And Labour backed the launch of anti-fascist groups to mobilise young people. Hence the ANL. As Neil Kinnock put it, 'The ANL performs a very important function for the Labour Party' (quoted in D Widgery, *Beating Time*, 1986).

## 'The ANL drove the fascists off the streets'

Many ANL supporters did seek to smash the NF. As an organisation, however, the ANL always dissociated itself from any form of violence. ANL leader Peter Hain insisted that 'we are not a counter-terrorist operation. I think that would be politically wrong, morally unacceptable' (*New Musical Express*, 7 March 1981).

Whenever there was conflict the ANL

disclaimed responsibility. In April 1979, Southall, in West London, erupted after Asian youth, trying to stop an NF election rally, fought running battles with the Special Patrol Group (SPG) of the Metropolitan Police. The SPG coshed to death East London teacher Blair Peach. The ANL made much of the death of Peach, a League supporter. But its leaders were equally concerned to distance themselves from the fighting.

Paul Holborow, ANL secretary then and now, announced that the Asian youth were 'not encouraged or provoked by the ANL' (*Observer*, 29 April 1979). And just to make things clear, Peter Hain insisted that 'by the time the League arrived at 6pm, over 300 blacks were already running riot' (*Evening News*, 24 April 1979).

The ANL's most shameful hour came in September 1978. The League had organised a



popularised by the racists of the British establishment.

The campaign's name illustrates the problem. What does 'Nazi' mean to most British people? It doesn't suggest racists; it says Germans. It conjures up images not of British thugs attacking Asian homes but of 'Krauts' blitzing British streets.

### Foreign infection

In calling fascists 'Nazis', the ANL emphasises the threat of racism spreading to Britain from Europe, rather like rabies. It is focusing its protests against visits to Britain by foreign bearers of this Continental infection, such as French National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. To the Anti-Nazi League, British right wingers are never simply home-grown racists; they are always 'admirers of Hitler', 'friends of Le Pen' or have some other foreign connection. (This approach is shared by the ANL's critics in the Anti-Racist Alliance, some of whom claim that blacks in Rochdale, Lancashire are in mortal peril from German skinheads on tour.)

The notion that racism is less a product of British society than an alien import fits easily into the general anti-foreign culture of British politics—and the particularly anti-German mood of today.

The British establishment is always on about how it beat the Nazis and turned back the German threat. With Britain's international status steadily declining, the Second World War stands out as the last real triumph for the British authorities. They feel far safer boasting of how they beat Hitler in the past than suggesting how they might cope with foreign rivals in the future.

The Second World War has become a permanent item of news in the British media, as feature films, documentaries and reminiscences mark every anniversary. The British government's growing concern about German domination of the new Europe, clearly illustrated around the Maastricht summit in December, has made it keener still to remind us all of what happened last time around.

Such anti-Nazism plays a big part in modern British nationalism; the British establishment itself is a sort of anti-Nazi league. Perhaps now we can see why the seventies version of the ANL is still so well thought of among academics and commentators who are otherwise anti-left—and why the ANL relaunch attracted so much press coverage before the campaign had done anything.

Being anti-Nazi is a British tradition that need have nothing to do with being anti-racist. Indeed, it can be perfectly

compatible with the nationalistic views of the British right.

When the new ANL's leaflets warn that 'we can never forget Hitler's gas chambers', they are treading well-worn ground. Thatcherite minister Nicholas Ridley made much the same point, in the infamous interview which led to his resignation, when asked if his views on Germany weren't coloured by his wartime memories:

'Jolly good thing too.... It was pretty nasty. Only two months ago I was in Auschwitz, Poland. Next week I'm in Czechoslovakia. You ask them what they think about the Second World War. It's useful to remember.' (*Spectator*, 14 July 1990).

The Anti-Nazi League says 'we can never forget'; the anti-German Ridley agrees that 'it's useful to remember'.

The attempt to blame the Germans or French for racism can be turned into another Little Englander objection to foreigners as the source of our problems. Top Tories Nigel Lawson and Norman Tebbit each issued warnings against the threat of European fascism late last year. At the same time, both were giving firm support to the British government's racist crackdown on 'bogus refugees' in the Asylum Bill. There was no contradiction involved; for Lawson, Tebbit and Ridley, Continental 'Nazis' and third world 'scroungers' are just two different types of dirty foreigner.

### Cop out

The politics of the Anti-Nazi League avoid confronting the respectable racism of British nationalists. For example, the ANL singles out junior minister Alan Clark as 'unfit for office' because he is a Nazi sympathiser. By that criterion the senior Tory ministers, who authored the racist Asylum Bill but don't share Clark's affinity for Rottweilers called Eva Braun, are presumably qualified to rule.

The attempt to single out 'Nazism' misses the key connection. The everyday nationalism of British politics is the bedrock of racism. Even in a country like France, where Le Pen's Front National has polled almost 20 per cent, tackling the anti-foreign consensus among the ruling Socialist and other mainstream parties would be the precondition for isolating the far right. In Britain, where there is no 'Nazism' but plenty of respectable racism, this must be the priority.

In contrast, the approach of the ANL can only reinforce the narrow-minded national prejudice in British politics. When the ANL says that it will 'drive the Nazis back into the gutter they come from', it would be easy to draw the conclusion that by 'gutter' they mean Germany.

**march to be followed by a carnival in Brockwell Park, South London.**

The NF announced that it intended to march through East London on the same day. The ANL not only refused to divert the march to East London to stop the fascists, it also refused to announce to the carnival that an NF march was taking place. While 100 000 people rocked against racism in Brixton, it was left to a handful of anti-racists to protect the largely Bengali area of Brick Lane, East London from fascist attack.

### 'The ANL humiliated the NF at the polls in 1979'

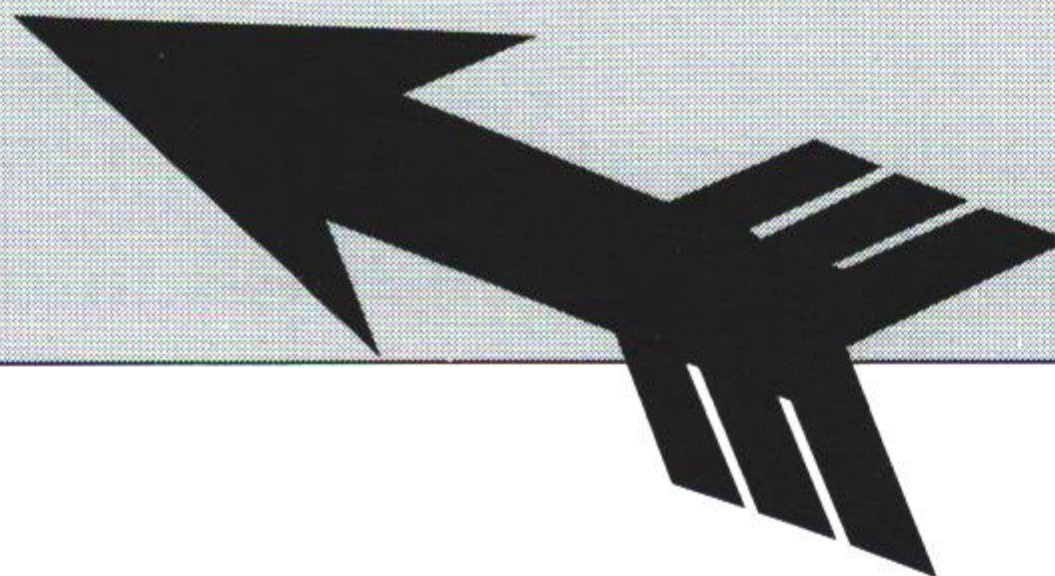
In the 1977 GLC elections the NF beat the Liberals into third place. Two years later, in the May 1979 general election, the NF received just 1.4 per cent of the votes in the constituencies in which it stood. The ANL claimed that its anti-fascist campaign was responsible for the collapse. In fact, as one academic study notes, the NF vote slumped because of 'the partial appropriation of the National Front's posture on race by the Conservative Party' (A Messina, *Race and Party Competition in Britain*, 1989).

The Tories under Margaret Thatcher set out to turn race into an electoral issue. In January 1978, in the run-up to the local elections, Thatcher made an

**infamous speech: 'The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, then people are going to be rather hostile to those coming in.' Asked whether she hoped to woo back Tory defectors to the NF, Thatcher replied in uncompromising fashion:**

**'Oh, very much back, certainly, but I think that the National Front has in fact attracted more people from Labour voters than from us; but never be afraid to tackle something that people are worried about.'** (Quoted in *Race and Party Competition in Britain*)

The Tories romped home in May 1979. NF chairman Andrew Brons conceded that 'Mrs Thatcher's apparent anti-immigrant stance was responsible for our supporters voting Conservative' (*Times*, 1 March 1980). While the ANL celebrated the NF's defeat at the polls, the new Tory government started a racist clampdown, from passport checks in dole offices to police swamp operations in inner cities.





# Kurds and codes

Andrew Calcutt reports on  
a story of everyday prejudice in Hackney

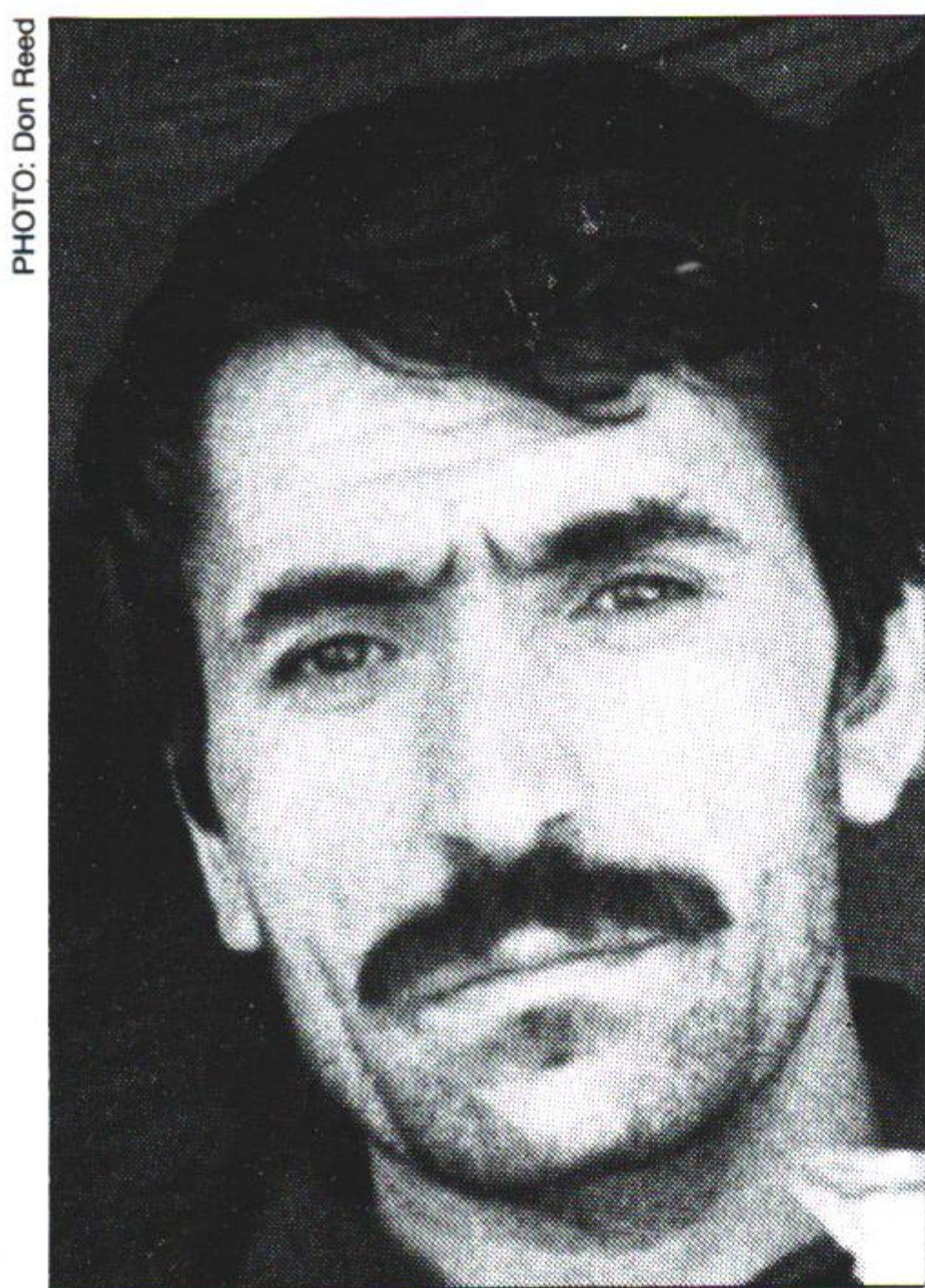


PHOTO: Don Reed

was more forthright: 'Their problems are not our problems and many of them are illegal anyway.'

That first mention of 'illegal immigrants' had the same effect as a starting pistol. From then on, speakers raced to make pejorative remarks about Kurdish people. One woman was convinced that the centre would be 'a gambling den after hours'. A homeowner foresaw that 'house values will go down drastically'. Another complained that Milton Gardens was 'in danger of turning into a ghetto for the disenfranchised'.

## Cheats and vandals

As the meeting went on, a succession of speakers portrayed Turkish and Kurdish people as cheats, vandals and scroungers on the welfare state. 'I don't know how they can afford it but the Turkeys drive bigger cars than anyone else.... They've got community centres all over the place.... Look what they've done to the old Simpson's building in Stoke Newington, it's covered in filthy posters and refuse.... And don't tell me they're not receiving a grant for the new centre because I wasn't born yesterday.'

By the end of the meeting some were yelling about 'what the Kurds wipe their bottoms with', and threatening to 'burn it down'. The last word went to an irate white man who shouted at a junior planning officer representing Hackney council, 'Listen, girl, just tell them we don't want them here'.

## Leading by example

It was no surprise to hear Milton Gardens residents express hostility towards Kurdish refugees. After all, they were only echoing the message currently being enshrined in law by the Tory government's Asylum Bill. Tory ministers speak in code too. Home secretary Kenneth Baker has denied all accusations of racism and said that the bill will cut waiting time for asylum-seekers. But the government is well aware that creating a scare about 'bogus economic refugees' will stir up resentment against 'immigrant scroungers'.

Put into plain English, the government's message to Kurdish refugees could be summed up as 'Just tell them we don't want them here'.

The anti-immigrant atmosphere promoted by the Tories has only been strengthened by the posturing and manoeuvres of the Labour Party. Labour-run Hackney council's stance over Milton Gardens is a case in point.

The allocation of Milton Gardens library to Kurdish refugees takes place against a background of council cuts. The Milton Gardens housing office, a laundry and an old people's centre have already been closed. The adventure playground is under threat. The library is disused only because the council shut it down as part of a cost-cutting exercise, ignoring a sit-in by residents trying to keep it open. A resident complained, 'I paid my rates. Now my kids have to go to a library in Islington because Hackney can't provide one. It's ours. We want our library'.

## Politics of tokenism

Until recently, it was the fashion for Labour councils to make high-profile 'anti-racist' gestures. Playing off one ethnic group against another has long been the stock-in-trade of councils such as Hackney. In this context, Milton Gardens residents jumped to the conclusion that Hackney poll tax payers are forking out for Kurdish refugees to set up an advice centre in a library which had been closed due to lack of funds.

It so happens that Day-Mer, a Turkish and Kurdish solidarity group, offered to pay £100 a week rent. As one resident said, 'the council is not in sympathy with the Kurds, it's in sympathy with the £5000 a year they tendered to use the place'. But to many locals it must look like another costly episode in Labour's politics of tokenism.

At the protest meeting, council bureaucracy made the atmosphere more intense. A planning officer told residents that the council didn't need to tell them about the Day-Mer proposals because the library building was already 'designated for community use'. They protested, 'We are the community, not the Kurds'.

## Big woolly hats

Having created the conditions for a backlash, the Labour council made things worse. The first reaction from councillor Cam Matheson was to try to reassure Milton Gardens residents that 'the Kurds are not noisy, they don't play loud music and most of them don't own cars'. This sounded suspiciously like more coded comments, implying that Kurds do not fit the stereotype of black troublemakers. He might just as well have added 'and they don't wear big woolly hats'.

At a subsequent council committee meeting, councillors asked Milton Gardens householders to show the Kurdish refugees some 'brotherly love'. In the atmosphere of prejudice and cynicism which the Labour councillors had helped to create, residents predictably withheld their blessing.

Milton Gardens is just one little episode in the everyday story of British racism as promoted by the Tories and accommodated to by the Labour Party. Crack the racist code and you'll find that every city has a thousand such tales to tell. ●

**T**raffic congestion is bad enough as it is. What will it be like if the centre opens?'. The speaker was unhappy about plans to open a Kurdish refugee advice centre in a disused library on the Milton Gardens estate in Hackney, north-east London. Other residents at the protest meeting complained that they already had to put up with 'overspill from Arsenal football ground', and that the centre would add to the problems of a 'highly stressed area'.

The Milton Gardens protesters seemed to be talking about the niggly little problems of everyday life. But they were speaking in code. Their main concern was not Arsenal fans or cars, but Kurds. The coded racism eventually came out of the closet at the protest meeting attended by about 80 residents. They weren't cartoon-character racists with big boots and Union Jack tattoos. They were single parents, pensioners, manual workers and unemployed: ordinary-looking people speaking the language of ordinary racism.

The meeting began with complaints about loud music and traffic access. But one speaker



# 'WHO CONTROLS THE PAST CONTROLS THE FUTURE'

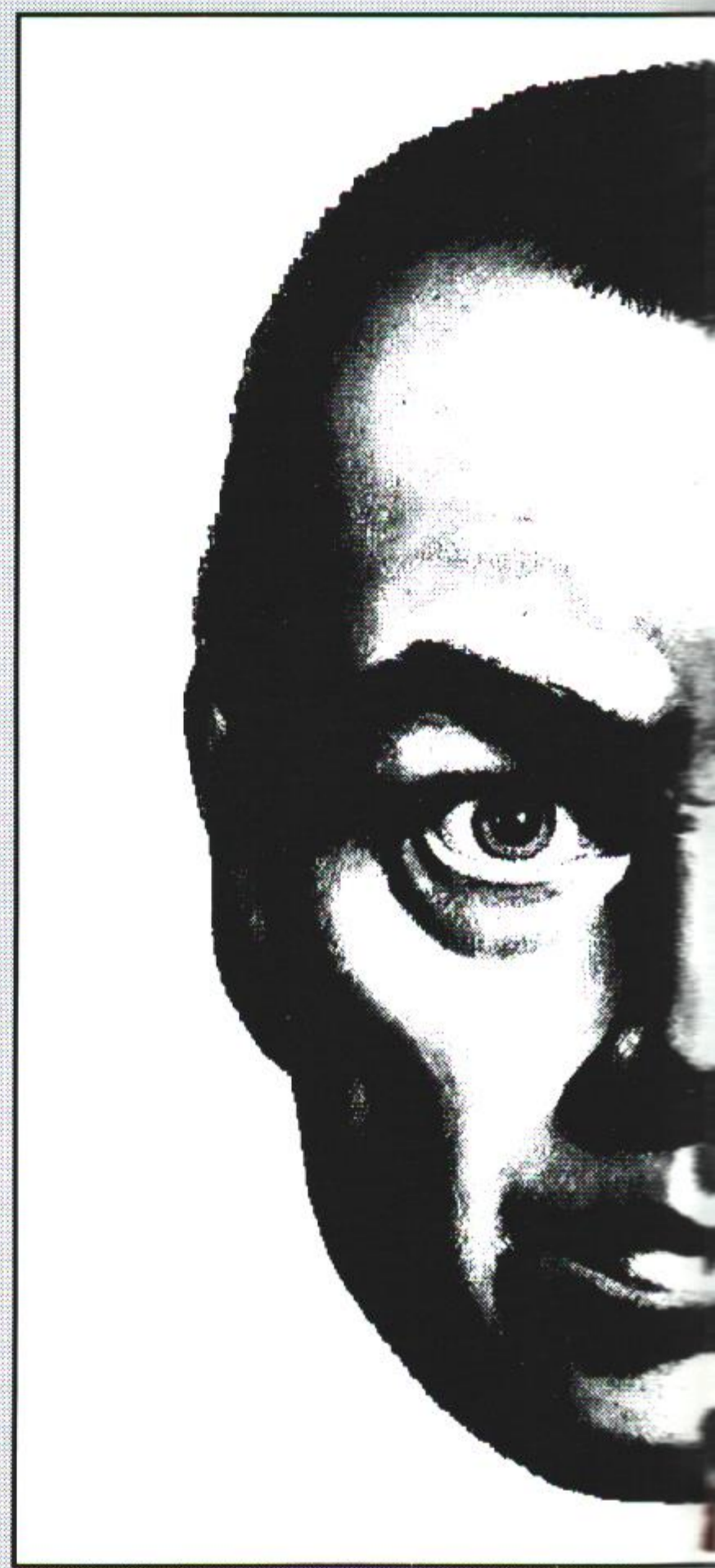
(or so they say)

In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Big Brother state has a Ministry of Information which continually rewrites official history in order to lend legitimacy to what is happening in the present. When the state changes sides in a war, the records are revised to show that it has always been at war with its new enemy; when an official falls from grace, his name and picture is removed from all the old newspapers; and so on.

The rewriting of history today may not have reached that Orwellian level of efficiency. But East and West alike, elites and experts are now hard at work reinterpreting many aspects of the

past. And the reasons behind the new fashion for revising history have much in common with the official slogan which guided the Ministry of Information's work: 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past'.

By inventing a mythological past, governments and their supporters are seeking refuge from an uncertain present. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc has unfrozen history and removed old certainties. Coupled with the arrival of capitalist slump, these events have thrown the world order into confusion. Fearful of the new, many in



**S**ociety often uses the past to flatter itself. National celebrations and anniversaries focus attention on moments of glory and triumph. This is why British television produces such a plethora of programmes about the Second World War – and why the war even makes regular appearances under the guise of a news item. The triumph of 1945 is relived time and again, as

contemporary society is reminded that even after Europe was defeated Britain fought on.

In the recent period, as the glorification of the past has become more pervasive it has also become more problematic. The project of rewriting history always provokes disputes about its meaning. Today, throughout Europe—East and West—here are furious rows about

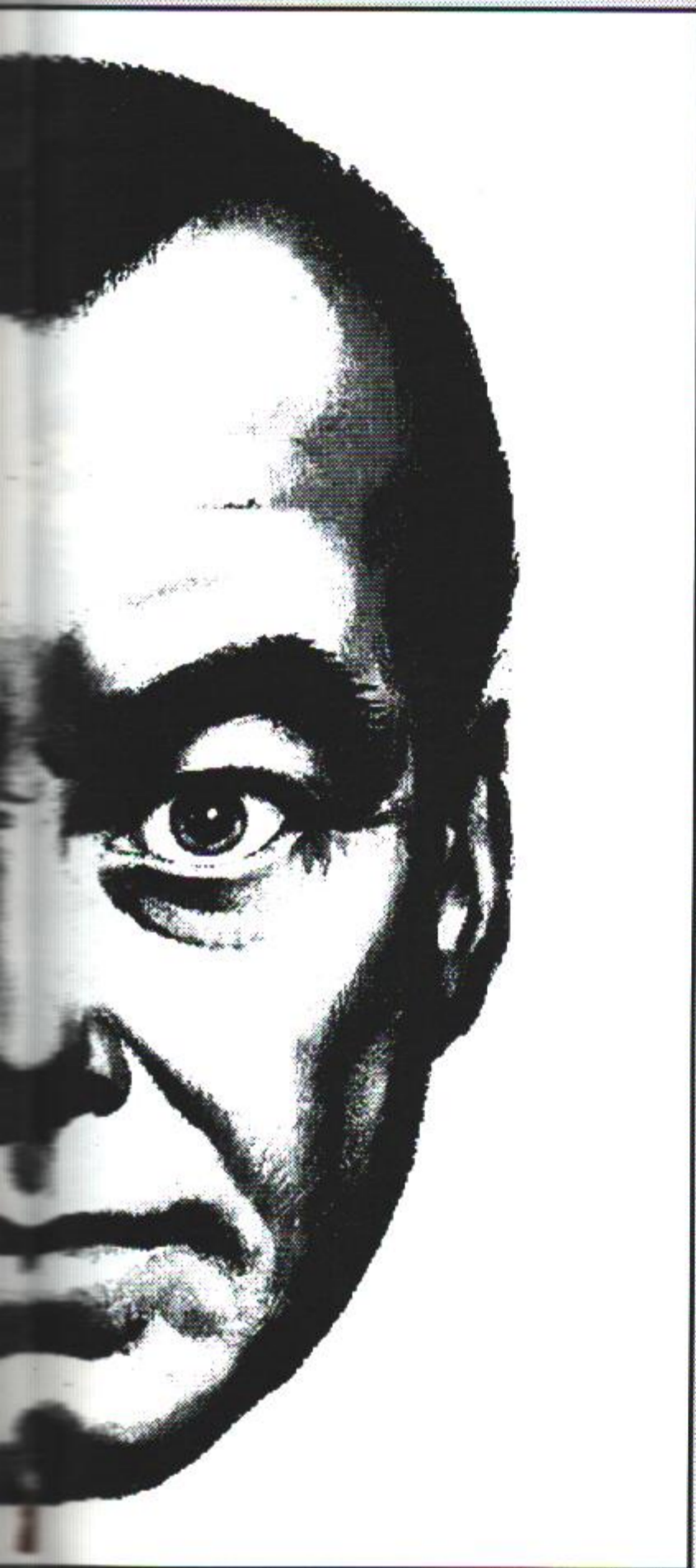
who did what to whom in the past. Similar controversies abound in the USA, where even key national myths such as the pioneering spirit behind the opening up of the Wild West are no longer beyond question.

Nothing about the past can be taken for granted today. Traditional heroes are now vilified while former villains are resurrected as saints. So the project of commemorating the five hundredth



# OLS THE PAST THE FUTURE'

hey hope)



authority are trying to find comfort and legitimacy by promoting a safe and sanitised version of the good old days.

In the new states of Eastern Europe, the emerging elites seek to justify their rule by inventing entire national histories. In the USA, concern about the decline of American power is caught up in historical controversies about national heroes from Columbus to John F Kennedy. In the new Germany, the right is revising history to rehabilitate nationalism. And in Britain, the Conservatives emphasise the importance of past traditions in a bid to disguise the fact that they can offer us no future.

But Big Brother's slogan is

too simplistic. Rewriting history and controlling the past is not enough to ensure control over the future. That will only be decided in the conflicts of the real world in the present. The authorities' attempt to mythologise all our yesterdays cannot be allowed to distract from the grim realities of their system today—and the grimmer prospects for tomorrow.

Below Frank Füredi examines the culture of pessimism behind the new cult of the past. On the pages that follow, and in the Marxist Review of Books (p43), we explore other aspects and examples of the fashion for rewriting history

anniversary of Christopher Columbus' landing in the Americas has provoked a furious denunciation of the man. In some quarters, this longstanding symbol of exploration is now portrayed as little short of a war criminal. Meanwhile former fascist war criminals from East Europe are in the process of being rehabilitated.

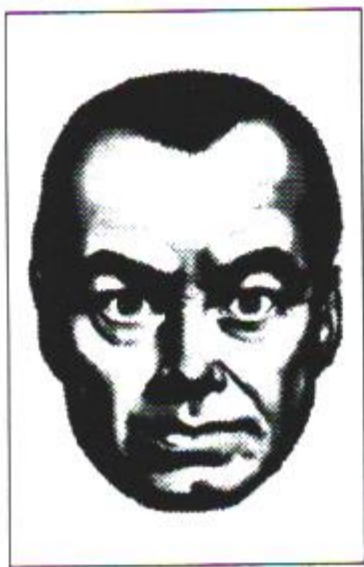
Take the example of the Slovakian, Father Josef Tiso. President of the

puppet Slovakian republic between 1939 and 1945, who happily introduced the genocidal Nuremberg laws against the Jews, he was duly hanged for his war crimes. Today, right-wing Slovak nationalists treat Tiso as a hero and are even campaigning to beatify him.

The new hothouse of historical revisionism creates an atmosphere in which anything goes. The European

right has launched a campaign to whitewash all of the past episodes it finds embarrassing. For example, it is now common to refer to the happy days of freedom in Russia under the Tsars. Newspaper articles often treat the last Tsar as a fully paid-up democrat who presided over a jolly old Russia, tolerant, prosperous and free. In the same way, the pre-1945 Baltic republics and East European countries





are depicted as democratic and well-off societies.

Such a selective recollection of the past conveniently fails to recall the tyranny that was Tsarist Russia. The appalling levels of poverty before the October 1917 Revolution are but a minor footnote to the sentimental recollections of the good old days. In those days the Tsar was universally loathed; after his overthrow, even the British royal family refused to grant him asylum, for fear that his unpopularity might reflect on the House of Windsor. Not so long ago, it was also standard practice to refer to the interwar governments of Eastern Europe as tinpot dictatorships. The terms democracy, prosperity and freedom were conspicuous by their absence in discussions of the pre-1945 Baltic states and other Eastern states.

### The monster Lenin

The invention of a happy go lucky pre-revolutionary Russia and prewar Eastern Europe is paralleled by the fabrication of the monster Lenin. Poor old Lenin never had a good press in the West, but with the 'opening' of hitherto secret archives new sordid details can be revealed.

According to one revelation (reported in the same reliable newspaper that brought us the 'Hitler diaries' and 'Kinnock's Kremlin connection'), Lenin ordered soldiers to 'cross the border' into Latvia and Estonia and 'hang 100 to 1000 bureaucrats and aristocrats' (see *Sunday Times*, 6 October 1991). You can almost visualise the incident. There is the monster Lenin, tucking into his breakfast muesli, trying to decide how many bureaucrats his soldiers should murder. Unable to focus his mind, he writes 'hang 100 to 1000'. The opening of numerous other secret archives in the old Stalinist states ought to provide plenty of raw material for the further creative rewriting of history.

### Politicising the past

Of course, the real reason why new histories are being written has nothing to do with the opening of archives. It is an attempt to politicise the past—a central feature of the intellectual crusade launched by the contemporary right. From the standpoint of this conservative reaction, it is now even possible to ask 'was there a Holocaust?'. All of the embarrassing episodes associated with fascism and the Second World War can now be re-examined.

Why should they want to rerun the Second World War? Because that experience has undermined the moral authority and credibility of the right ever since. The ugly past made it difficult for the right to take the offensive. After more than 40 years of

suffering in silence, the collapse of the Stalinist bloc has given the European right the chance to let rip.

The recent French film *Uranus* serves as a model. In this film, set in postwar France, there is a kind of moral equivalence between the fascist collaborators and the communist members of the resistance. In fact, as individuals, it is the collaborators in the film that win the audience's sympathy. In Germany, meanwhile, the media has adopted the habit of referring to East European cities by their old pre-1945 German names. Who knows, they may be aware of something that we do not know about.

this art form. 'Let's get back to the fundamentals', he exhorts and everyone nods and seems to know what he means. In fact it means nothing. What are these fundamentals that invite our embrace? If they are so fundamental why would we abandon them in the first place?

In reality Clarke is relying on the widespread conservative instinct which suspects that what happened in the past must be better than what goes on today. To an extent, given the appalling state of affairs today, it is an understandable reaction. It is easy to draw the conclusion that something like education must have been better in the

**It is the sense  
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focus of concern**



The rewriting of history is an attempt to justify something today. The past, or a particular version of it, is used to legitimise the present. The close concern with history indicates a failure to grapple with problems in the here and now. Instead of attempting to elaborate novel solutions for contemporary problems, those who look backwards suggest that the answer already exists somewhere in the past.

The past itself becomes a source of legitimacy, and anything today can be justified by coupling it with yesterday. Even meaningless phrases can acquire the semblance of wisdom once the past has been mobilised in their support. Tory education secretary Kenneth Clarke is a consummate practitioner of

past than today. But was it? Anyone familiar with British social history can confirm that for the vast majority the quality of education was at least as poor. When Clarke invites Britain to return to the fundamentals, he is demanding a form of schooling that produced a semi-literate working class, carefully trained for subservience and exploitation.

The conservative imagination reaches its highpoint in the image of the good old days when there was no crime, when old ladies were helped across the street and no one was immoral. The contemporary obsession with the revising of history reflects an attempt to get back to this golden age. The usual procedure is to suggest that



we have lost touch with our wise traditions because of some betrayal committed by do-gooders. For example it is suggested that British education ('the best in the world'), went wrong because of the experimental teaching methods advocated by the Plowden Report. According to Sir Rhodes Boyson, Tory MP and educator, Plowden has 'destroyed the academic opportunities of two, if not three, generations of children' (*Sunday Times*, 26 January 1992).

The idea is that, by removing Plowden and a variety of sixties radicals and do-gooders, Britain will revert back to its unproblematic past.

someone who believes that sermons are the answer to the problems of our time.

The attempt to revive tradition is being pursued to its full and absurd conclusions. The suggestion by the National Curriculum Council to return to the Western classical tradition in the teaching of music indicates the full scope of this obsession. In and of itself the debate on the teaching of music is a relatively trivial matter. What is important is that such a little issue can now become the focus of a big political controversy. This frenetic attempt to uphold tradition reflects a lack of confidence in the future direction of

The rewriting of history and the culture of pessimism go hand in hand. It is the sense of society being at an impasse, and even in decline, which makes the past an attractive focus of concern. A new book, *The Great Reckoning*, by former *Times* editor William Rees-Mogg and James Dale Davidson, provides a systematic representation of this culture of pessimism.

### Doom and gloom

According to *The Great Reckoning*, history is punctuated by a series of cycles, which human beings do not understand. In the current cycle, ignorant men and women face a terrible economic slump with the gravest of consequences. The deep-seated pessimism of the authors is expressed not by the projection of their dreary scenario, but in their refusal even to pretend to offer a solution to humanity. The book is addressed to a small audience of privileged elites, who are counselled to flee the cities and adopt a strategy for survival: playing chess, seeking God and paying off outstanding debts.

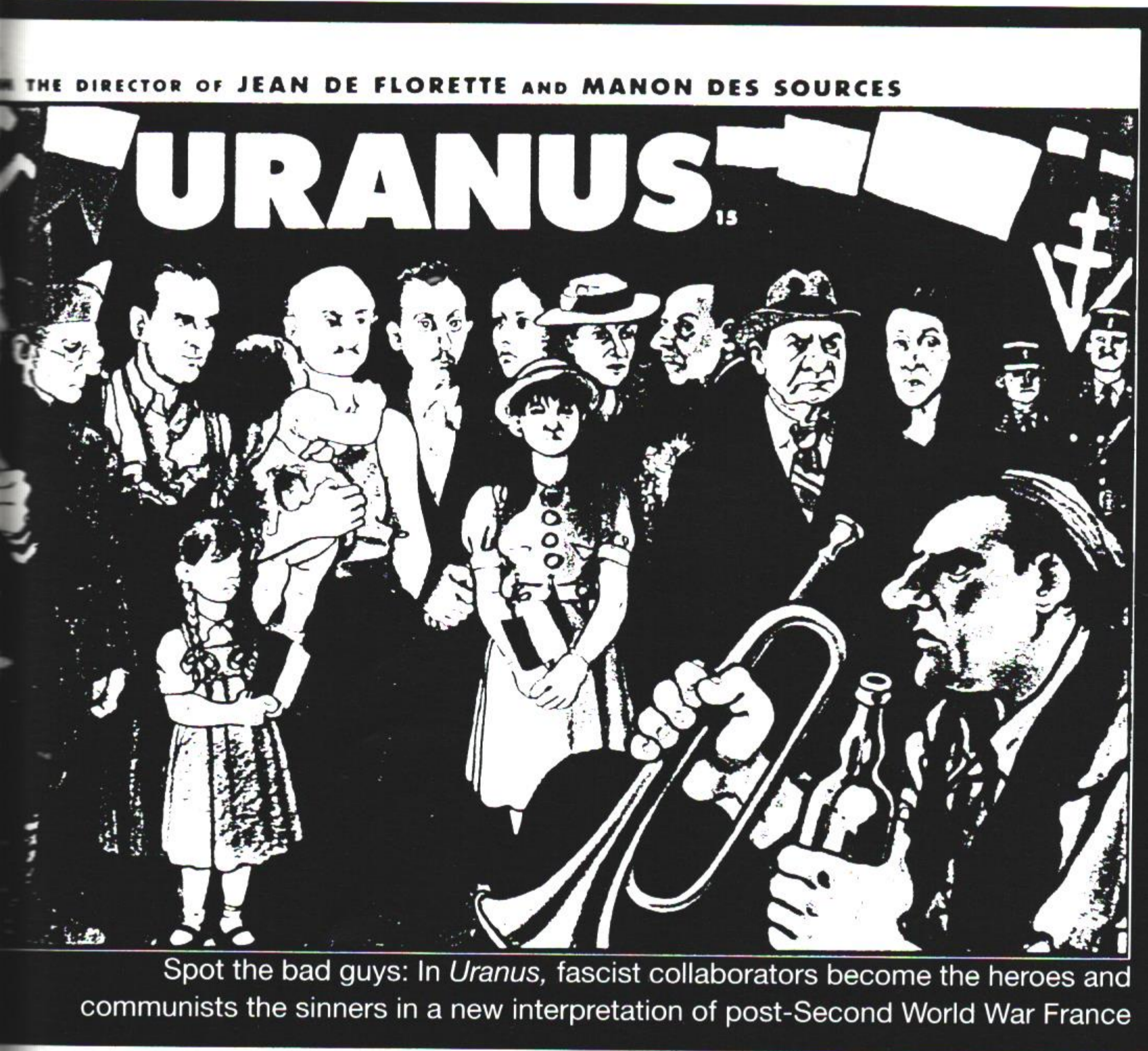
*The Great Reckoning* may contain some eccentric themes but it very much captures the mood of the Anglo-American establishment in the nineties. It is a mood that combines the rhetoric of confidence with an unrestrained sense of pessimism. The confidence relates to their new found freedom to rewrite the past. With the disintegration of the old left, few obstacles stand in the way of the Western right's project. Others too, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, can participate in the fabrication of a new history.

### Claim the future

However, it is one thing to manipulate the past; it requires merely a selective memory, a flair for public relations, and the ability to use words in such a way that your contemporary interests are expressed in the past tense. It is another thing altogether to overcome the problems of the present and to inspire a clear sense of direction for the future.

The culture of pessimism allows establishment figures such as Rees-Mogg a narrow avenue of escape from their failure to engage the contemporary problems of society. They can divert the blame on to historic forces outside of human control rather than admitting that their own second-hand ideas are useless.

This state of affairs suggests a potentially ideal division of labour. Let the right absorb its energies in replaying cracked records and dreaming about the good old days. For our part, instead of rewriting history we would rather influence or make history ourselves. They can have the past—we would rather claim the future. ●



Spot the bad guys: In *Uranus*, fascist collaborators become the heroes and communists the sinners in a new interpretation of post-Second World War France

The editor of the *Daily Mail* asks us to pause and remember:

'Remember, also, those days when most church men felt called upon to preach the Gospel rather than strike social attitudes: when pews were not so empty and prelates not so politically full of themselves.' (*Daily Mail*, 17 October 1991)

The message is to forget about such new-fangled notions as social problems, get back to preaching the Gospel and the churches will be full again just like they were during our grandparents' days. The simple fact that churches have been empty for rather a long time need not distract

society. It indicates a desire to stop the march of time and to return to the safety of the past. The rewriting of history, even when executed with verve and panache, in fact means giving up on the future.

In an interesting column 'The profits of doom', *Guardian* journalist Ian Aitken observes that 'one of the disappointments for those of us who grew up during the war is the gradual withering of the energetic optimism which was the characteristic mood of the late forties and early fifties' (27 January 1992). Aitken accurately notes that the ideas of progress and human improvement have given way to a fatalistic sense of pessimism about the future.



# The dustbin of history

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

Eastern Europe's new rulers are buried in the past.

Irene Miller explains why

**G**o to the Museum of the Labour Movement in Budapest and it will be closed. You will be informed that the display, an assortment of photographs and memorabilia of horny handed workers, was deemed inappropriate. In its place you will be offered the 'Through the Iron Curtain' exhibition, organised by the Ministry of the Interior and the Museum of Contemporary History. There the history of Hungary begins in 1989, with the collapse of the Stalinist regime.

In Eastern Europe, history has become the political issue of the moment. In order to establish a new national identity in countries emerging from 40 years of Soviet domination, the new political elites are reviving the pre-Stalinist, interwar past when the nation states of Eastern Europe were nominally independent.

## 'Insane experiment'

The reconstitution of a national identity demands that the Stalinist era be written out of history. According to many East European thinkers today, the postwar era was a temporary deviation from a glorious national past, a brief interlude of madness that can now be consigned to the dustbin of history. Poland's former prime minister, Jan Krzysztof Bielecki, summed up the dominant view when he characterised communism as 'a shortlived, insane experiment': 'Poland's communist past is but a 40-year aberration in a history that stretches over 1000 years.' In other words, history has been frozen for 40 years; now we can begin where we left off.

In Romania, some intellectuals have called for a process of national purification so that the Romanian people can face the future untainted by the past. Octavian Paler argued that everybody had been implicated in the crimes of the Ceausescu regime: 'I wonder if we can ever forget that the dictatorship has dug out the worst from the cesspool of our defects, trying with diabolical perseverance to dehumanise us, to turn us into accomplices.' ('The need for purification', *Romanian Review*, No1, 1990)

Other cathartic measures are being advocated. In Hungary, yet another new law was passed in November 1991 to punish communists for their crimes. The old communist parties may not have been banned, but they have changed their names for fear of

the lynchmob. Showtrials of top Stalinist officials and secret police are organised to satisfy the widespread desire for revenge.

All traces of the past are being destroyed: statues are toppled, street names changed (more than 250 in Budapest alone) and central committee buildings transformed into stock exchanges. The education system no longer organises Russian or dialectics classes, but caters for Bible studies and household finances.

The old official history textbooks are being rewritten and literature banned during the past 40 years (including the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) is making a comeback. Old institutions of renown are being reinstated: in Hungary the State Philharmonic was renamed the National Philharmonic.

Settling scores with the past is a central part of the process of change in Eastern Europe. From the forties onwards the past was appropriated by the Stalinist regimes in a vain attempt to legitimise their power. Now it is the turn of the new elites to appropriate the past in a bid to consolidate their rule. The reconstitution of national identity in Eastern Europe today means the rehabilitation of the symbols and politics of the interwar years.

## Exhumations in Hungary

All the old flags and emblems of the past are back in fashion. New monuments to long forgotten national heroes are taking the place of Marx and Lenin. Istvan, the first king of Hungary and a saint to boot, has his crown and his right hand on public show (the crown was never his and the hand we are told has been saved by God). Since the disinterment and reburial of Imre Nagy, exhumations—from Horthy to Petöfi—have become a national pastime in Hungary.

The icons of Stalinism are being replaced by new symbols of nationhood. Everywhere, pre-Stalinist nationalists, dictators, priests, monarchs and fascists are being rehabilitated as national role models. From Jozef Pilsudski in Poland, who suspended democracy and installed a dictatorship, to Ion Antonescu in Romania, ally of the virulently anti-Semitic Iron Guard, and Josef Tiso in Slovakia, who presided over the mass extermination of Jews and Gypsies, past villains are today's heroes.

The problem facing all the political elites in

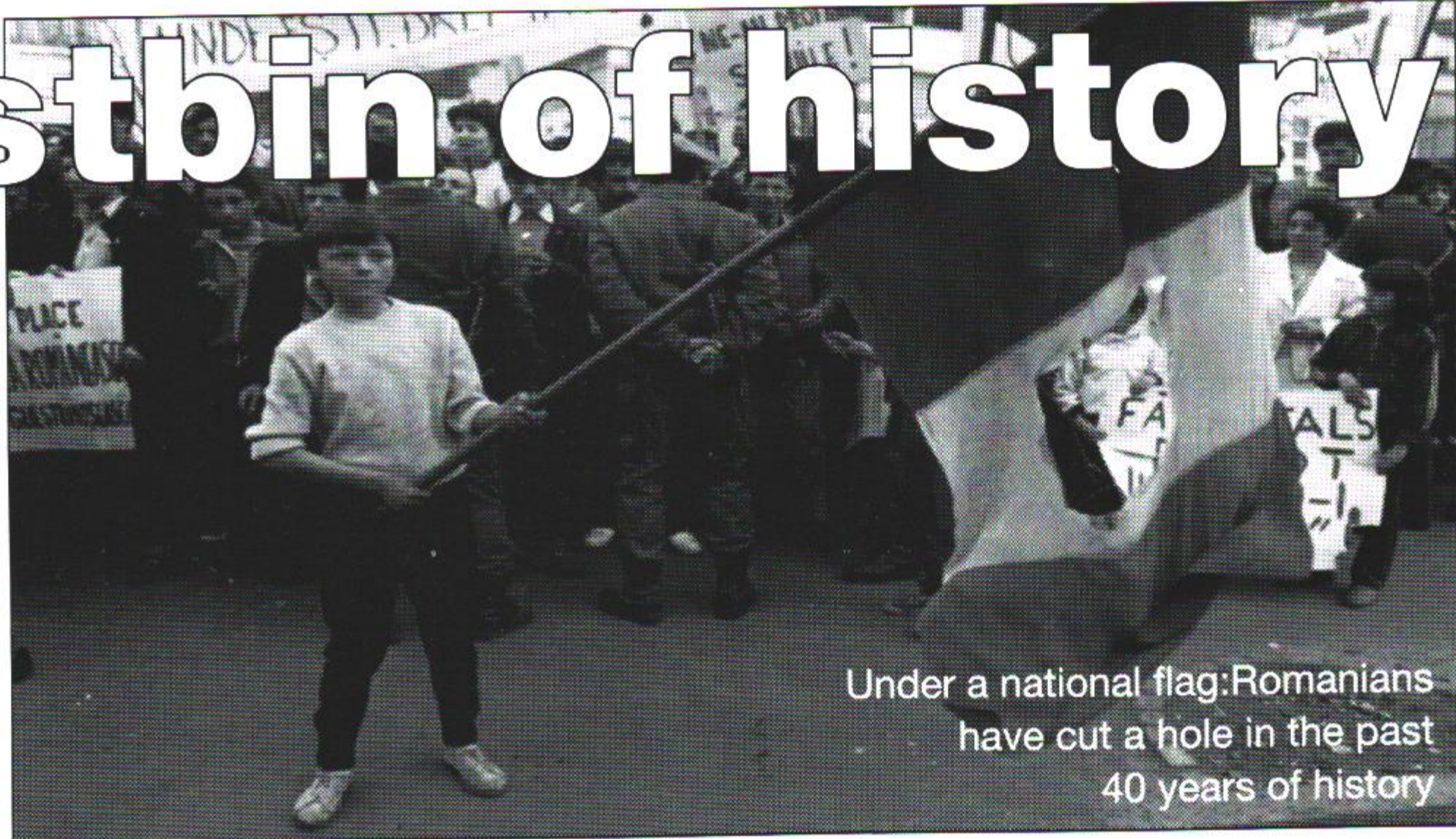
Eastern Europe is a lack of legitimacy. How do you possibly create a unified political culture in a place like Poland or Romania? It is clearly not possible to cohere the nation around a vision of economic prosperity when the market is creating only misery for most people. In fact, there is nothing to hold these societies together. Most people have abandoned any hope of improvement in their lives and no longer believe in anything. A culture of despair has descended on Eastern Europe three years after the triumphalism of its return to the capitalist fold.

The crisis of legitimacy facing all the new governments in Eastern Europe is nothing new. The historic weakness of capitalism in the region always prevented the elites from establishing a viable sense of nationhood. It is difficult to engender a sense of national pride in countries which cannot offer people enough to eat. That is why the tinpot regimes of the East always had to resort to repression on the one hand, and mystical propaganda about the nation's heroic past on the other, in a desperate bid to keep a grip on society.

Contrary to the established wisdom, national identity has always been weak in Eastern Europe for precisely these reasons. It is not the strength of nationalism that is the problem, but the weakness of capitalism. The inability of capitalism to establish a dynamic market and a truly international division of labour has turned whole regions of the world into economic wastelands, and engendered a frantic particularism among elites competing over scarce resources.

## Back to the future

In the absence of anything in the present that can inspire people, the new elites are once again hoping to create a national consensus based on the past. That means the return of all the old rubbish of history from the monarchy to mysticism. The re-emergence of anti-Semitism in societies where there are scarcely any Jews left is an ominous sign of what happens when you try to restore a sense of nationhood by appealing to the past. Far from 1989 being the inauguration of a new era of enlightened democracy, the future promises a return to the dark ages of reaction which blighted capitalist Eastern Europe in the interwar years. ●



Under a national flag: Romanians have cut a hole in the past 40 years of history



# No more heroes

## Emmanuel Oliver on what's behind the controversy about Oliver Stone's *JFK*

**H**e just wouldn't let it lie, would he? Oliver Stone has been getting up the noses of the American right with his film, *JFK*. Starring Hollywood's most self-righteous actor, Kevin Costner (as New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, for whom conspiracies lurk around every corner), the film turns the camera on the assassination of American president, John F Kennedy, in Dallas in 1963.

With Stone, the 1960s have always been a bit of an obsession. Why else would anybody want to make a film about Jim Morrison? Vietnam has been even more of an obsession, which is understandable given that Stone was in the thick of it. The director has tried to do what his teacher, Martin Scorsese, told him to do: make films based on his experiences. Stone's first film at college was about Vietnam, and then came *Platoon* and *Born On The Fourth Of July*. Stone's commitment to telling it how he saw it is laudable, but his rewrite of the sixties is just not plausible.

### Right and left

The sixties are why Stone is the centre of controversy. His film challenges the right's view of that decade. For the right, the 1960s are responsible for all the evils of the 1990s: rising crime, declining moral standards, bad education, the nanny state, in short everything which is rotten, irrelevant and discredited about Western society.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the conservative backlash against the sixties has put liberals on the defensive. But not Stone. He has another story to tell about the sixties. He doesn't seek merely to explain Kennedy's death. He expounds a thesis which explains America's decline as the consequence of a conspiracy by the US establishment to kill off the one person who might have made the sixties (and subsequent decades) a success: JFK.

All the pillars of the US elite have a cameo role in *JFK*: the CIA, the FBI, the military-industrial complex, the mafia, the moral majority. Everybody and anything associated with the right is discredited by association with a plot to kill JFK, or a plot to cover up the killing.

When Stone has Kevin Costner say, 'We have all become Hamlets in our country, children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne', you know that *JFK* is a polemic masquerading as a drama. If you don't believe me, just read some of the surreal interviews Stone has given on Kennedy: 'I think that if he'd lived, the Cold War would

have ended in the seventies and the era of Reagan and Gorbachev would have been brought forward 20 years.' (*Guardian*, 31 January 1992)

For Stone it was not the radicalism of the sixties which is responsible for today's problems. On the contrary, those who conspired to rid the world of the liberal superhero JFK, are to blame for the social malaise afflicting the American way of life.

### Who and why

No doubt there were high-powered political interests involved in the Kennedy killing and cover-up. We may never know whodunit. But one thing is certain: Kennedy was not killed because he was a liberal who would have pulled America out of Vietnam. In fact, Stone's idealisation of JFK is about as credible as the right's demonisation of the sixties.



PHOTO: Warner Bros Inc

### Nice hats, shame about Stone's hero-worship of a US militarist

The liberal superhero depicted in *JFK* is a myth. From being in bed with the mafia to being involved with murder plots, Kennedy probably made enough enemies to get himself killed ten times over. Even leaving aside the seamier side of Kennedy's politicking, his presidential track record puts paid to the idea that the world would have been a better place if he had lived.

Kennedy was a Cold Warrior of conviction. Far from challenging the Cold War, he relaunched the arms race, increasing defence spending by 25 per cent in the first 14 months of his presidency. America under JFK

stockpiled enough nukes to destroy every major city in the world. And JFK came close to using them, with his blundering Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis.

Stone says there would have been no Vietnam if Kennedy had lived: but it was Kennedy who stepped up US intervention in Vietnam. In 1961, he despatched agents to North Vietnam to engage in 'sabotage and light harassment'. Kennedy sent in counter-insurgency forces and authorised the use of helicopters and defoliants. If Kennedy had lived, he would probably have had a very different starring role in Stone's rendition of the sixties.

Stone shares the same approach to history as his opponents on the right. In the absence of a coherent agenda to deal with the problems of the 1990s, both radicals and conservatives take refuge in rewriting the past. Neither side can produce an idea to inspire today, so their heroes are yesterday's men. For the right, John Wayne; for the left, John Kennedy.

### Stuck in the 60s

The right has no answers to the problems of the present, so it shifts the blame on to the sixties. The left has no alternative to offer in the here and now, so it seeks one in the sixties.

The merit of JFK for Stone is that he died young. He can be shown in a good light because he fell before America's decline set in. Everything that has gone wrong in the USA came after JFK: Vietnam, Watergate, Irangate and all the other watersheds in the slippage of

American power. JFK can serve as a hero because he happened to die before he could expose himself as incompetent, corrupt and bereft of any original thoughts, in the tradition of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

In *JFK*, Stone has tried to reconstruct a liberal hero for the unheroic nineties. But the past is a poor substitute for relevant ideas in the present, and a dead hero cannot compensate for the lack of living ones. Unfortunately for the Democratic Party, Edward Kennedy and his nephew don't exactly fit the bill. ●



Is Eastern Europe experiencing a rebirth of nationalism?

Joan Phillips suggests that national identities are being invented and history rewritten by political elites in order to legitimise their rule. Nowhere is this more transparent than in Croatia

**T**hinking of becoming a nation state? It's easy. Before you start, assemble a good public relations team. Get them writing lots of glossy histories about your glorious national past. And don't forget the trappings: flags, shields, emblems, uniforms, stamps and currency. While you're at it, erect some statues of national heroes and open a few heritage museums. Best of all, invent a language (it doesn't matter if nobody understands it). Now, throw together a constitution. All set? Declare your sovereignty and appeal for international recognition (but make sure you do some canvassing first). If you're lucky, it may suit the interests of some great power to take your side. And finally, a word of warning: don't do it if you're not prepared to go to war.

Croatia showed that it can be done. Zagreb politicians spent two years marketing the idea of Croatian nationhood, before winning recognition from the 12 EC member states on 15 January 1992, six months after seceding from the Yugoslav federation. According to the Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman, this was the fulfilment of a centuries' old aspiration for national sovereignty. In reality, it was the culmination of a two-year campaign of nation building by his government. A campaign which succeeded only after an enormous loss of life in six months of civil war with Serbia, and only with strongarm German sponsorship.

### Cradle of civilisation

Over the past two years, the Zagreb regime has done a good job manufacturing a national identity for Croatia. The ministry of information has produced a mountain of literature to convince the world that Croatia is a cradle of Western civilisation. Legions of professors at the University of Zagreb have produced new histories testifying to Croatia's national destiny. A new constitution has appeared, dwelling on the glories of the nation since time immemorial.

# How to invent

The process of Croatisation has extended to language. What the world outside knows as Serbo-Croatian is no longer recognised as such in Zagreb. More than 1000 new words have appeared which even Croats themselves cannot understand. According to the new constitution, only the Croatian language and the Latin script can be used for official purposes.

### Nation building

The blue, white and red Croatian flag with its red and white chequerboard shield in the centre is everywhere. New monuments to Croatian heroes have been erected. In Zagreb's main square, the statue of the nineteenth century Croat hero, General Josip Jelacic, has been given pride of place (the fact that he was a great admirer of Serbia has been quietly forgotten). The names of streets and squares have been changed. The police have been kitted out in new uniforms. The presidential guard have been dressed up in garish red and gold regalia. The Croatian dinar has replaced the Yugoslav variety. The new postage stamp is on its way. No doubt a national football team will be cobbled together.

Croatian propaganda has emphasised the unique ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural tradition of the Croatian people as distinct from that of the Serbs. Croatia has been presented as Western, Catholic, democratic and cultured. Serbia has been depicted as Eastern, Orthodox, communist and barbarian. Zagreb's appeal for international recognition was based on the claim that it represented a civilisational frontier between West and East. Radovan Pavic, professor of political science at the

University of Zagreb, characterised Croatia as a buffer zone between 'Europe and Barbaria' (*Gaudeamus*, No4, Fall 1991).

Croatian politicians have succeeded in inventing a national identity which did not exist a few years ago. Of course, they would never let on that their national identity is a fake. No aspiring nationalist could admit that his nation was starting from scratch: authenticity demands a minimum of a few centuries. In order to confer legitimacy on their claim to nationhood, Croatian politicians have sought the authority of the past. By projecting the existence of a separate ethnic, linguistic, confessional, cultural and national history back into the past, they hope to lend credence to the idea that Croatia has earned its right to independence.

### Millennial identity

The Croatian constitution of 22 December 1990 expounds the historical foundations of the Croatian nation. Apparently the millennial national identity of the Croatian nation first manifested itself in the formation of Croatian principalities in the seventh century. This insistence on the existence of a national identity centuries before the emergence of modern nation states seems somewhat suspect. The constitution's emphasis on the continuity of Croatian statehood is also rather bizarre. Croatia's existence as an annexe of the Hapsburg empire and then a constituent part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia is difficult to reconcile with the idea of Croatian statehood.

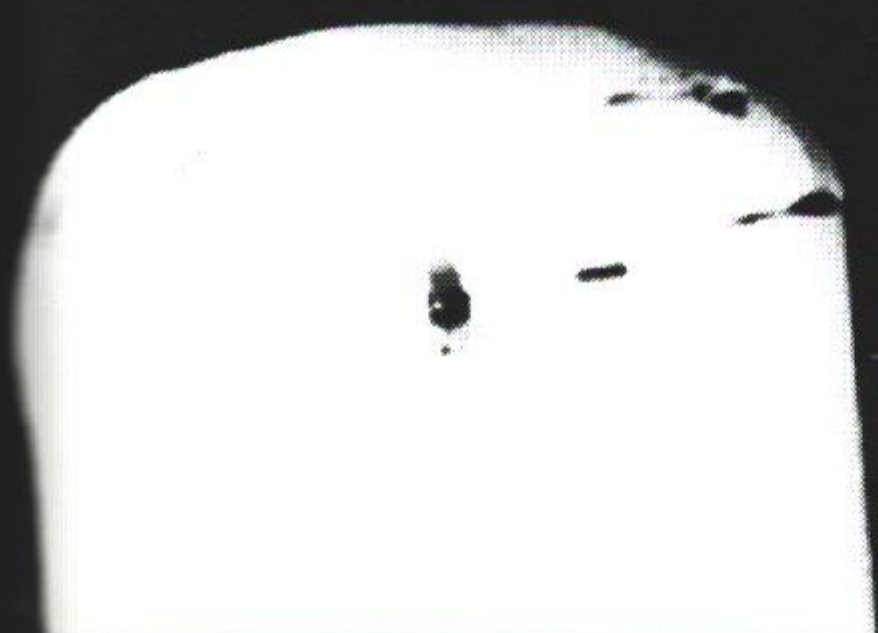
But that only goes to show that





**a**  
***nation***

PHOTO: Michael Kramer



Lighting candles for the dead,  
Zagreb, January 1992: creating a Croatian  
identity means getting a new generation of  
Croatian youth to worship a mythical national past



creating a national identity involves the official rewriting of history. Nothing about the past can be taken for granted any longer. Reading the countless new histories coming out of Zagreb, it is easy to lose touch with historical reality. The line between fact and fiction becomes blurred, as new interpretations are imposed on historical events, and some historical happenings are erased altogether.

### Yugo your way

One striking example of how history is being rewritten is the concerted effort to rubbish the Yugoslav idea and to suggest that it never meant anything to Croats. Today it is easy to forget that the idea of a South Slav union was once eagerly embraced by Croats as well as Serbs. Although they did not belong to the same state until 1918, Serbs and Croats had been striving to establish cultural and political union for almost a century before that.

In the 1840s, under the influence of the Serb, Vuk Karadzic, and the Croat, Ljudevit Gaj, Serbs and Croats cooperated to establish a common South Slav literary language. For the most progressive thinkers of the time, a union of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was seen, in the words of the young Croatian writer Vladimir Cerina, 'as the only outlet from our battered and dismembered life, which leads nowhere' (quoted in T Butler, 'Ivo Andric: a "Yugoslav" writer (1892-1975)', *Cross Currents*, No10, October 1991).

### Eastern unity

The idea of South Slav unity expressed the aspiration of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs to free themselves from the domination of the great powers. For Croatia, in particular, unity with Serbia offered the best escape route from Hapsburg rule. The progressive content of the Yugoslav idea was well expressed by the first congress of the Social Democratic parties of South Eastern Europe in Belgrade in 1910:

'To free ourselves from particularism and narrowness; to abolish frontiers that divide people who are in part identical in language and culture, in part economically bound up together; finally to sweep away forms of foreign domination both direct and indirect that deprive people of their right to determine their own destiny for themselves.' (Quoted in L Trotsky, *The Balkan Wars*, p30)

What a contrast to the orgy of petty particularism that has been promoted by Zagreb politicians in recent years!

According to the rewritten histories emanating from Zagreb today, however, the idea of a South Slav union was little more than a Serbian plot. Vuk Karadzic

is accused of being a purveyor of Greater Serbian ideology. The Yugoslav idea is denounced as a cover for Serbian expansionism. The suggestion is that when Croatian politicians decided voluntarily and overwhelmingly to join the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 they were being conned into something which they did not really believe in (see for example, *Croatia Between War and Independence*, University of Zagreb and OKC-Zagreb, November 1991).

The most blatant example of how history is being rewritten to suit the purposes of the Croatian regime concerns the Second World War. The veneration of the past becomes problematic when the past does not show the nation in a venerable light. History needs to be rewritten to minimise any inglorious episodes.

### Nazi puppet

The history of the Second World War is especially problematic for Croatia. On 10 April 1941, following the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia, Ante Pavelic's fascist Ustashe movement proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). The Nazi quislings in Zagreb embarked on a campaign of genocide against Serbs, Jews and Gypsies which lasted until their defeat at the hands of Marshal Tito's communist partisans in 1945.

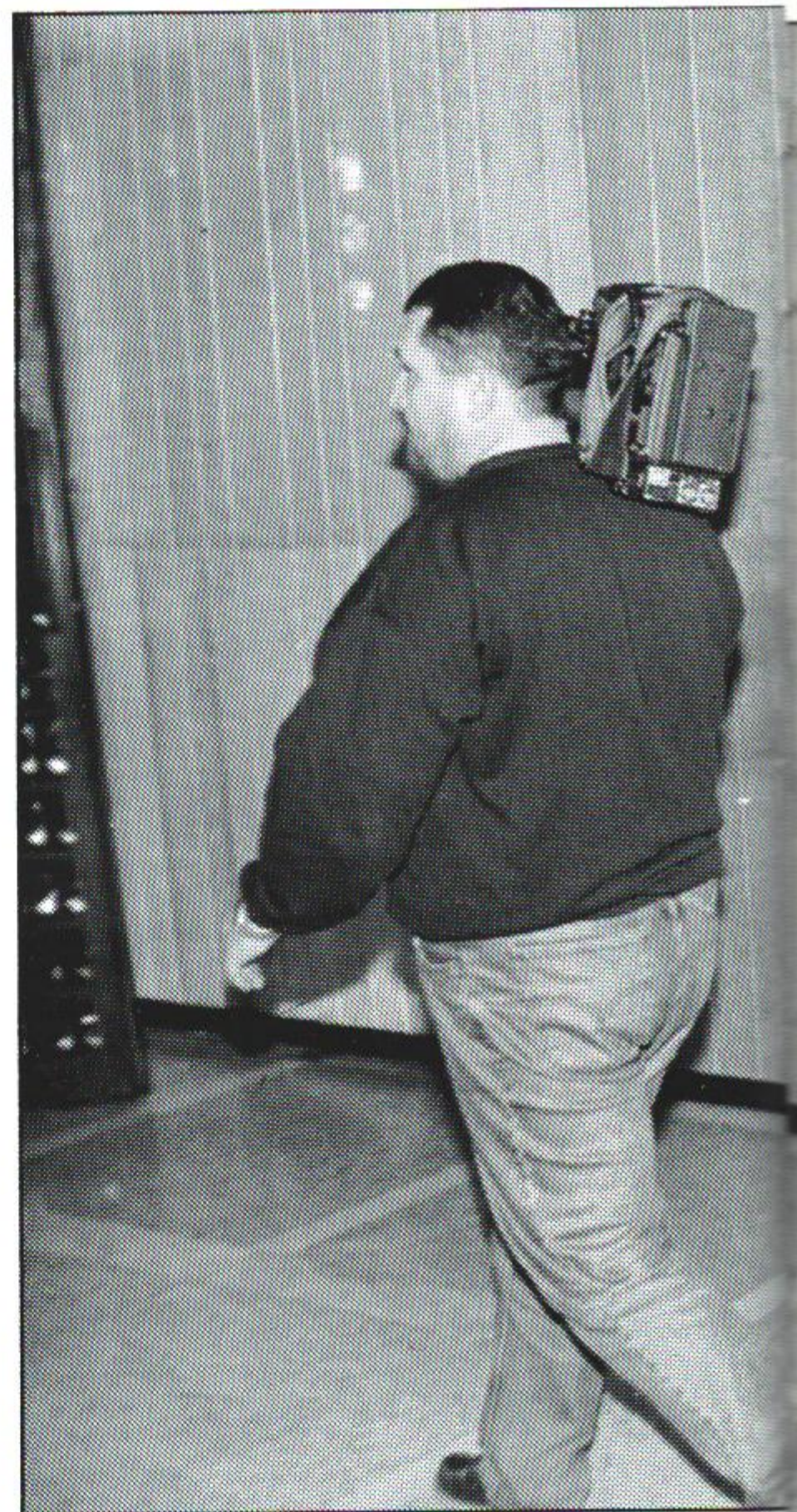
With full support from the Reich and the Vatican, Pavelic banned the Serbian Cyrillic script, closed down Orthodox schools, destroyed Orthodox churches and began the forced conversion of Serbian Orthodox Christians. The government's policy towards the Serbs was baldly stated: convert a third, expel a third, kill a third. Jews and Gypsies fared no better. Massacres were carried out in Serbian villages and Ustashe concentration camps in Croatia and Bosnia. A collection of archive photographs recently published by the Belgrade regime bears grim testimony to the savagery of the killing.

### Sound of silence

It is impossible to ignore what happened in the war, but that hasn't stopped some people trying to smother these events with silence. A chapter on the wartime experience in a book produced by Zagreb university manages not to mention the Ustashe once. Censorship by the Croatian government ensures that no film showing the Germans in a bad light can be shown on television. When the magazine *Danas* carried an article criticising the regime's censorious policy, the main television news had a major item attacking the magazine.

Soon after its election in March 1990, the new government renamed the Square of the Victims of Fascism in

Zagreb as the Square of the Croatian Kings. This provoked a strong reaction from the Jewish community in Zagreb, which organised a protest demonstration. But a spokesman for Tudjman's party, Tomislav Krusic, told me candidly why the government changed the name: 'Because we don't want to remember such periods any more. We just don't want to remember.'



However, it is simply not possible for the Croatian authorities to deny the past. Instead, they have tried to impose a new interpretation on what happened. One commonplace argument is that everybody in Yugoslavia was equally guilty and suffered equally.

Lea Baumann, a spokeswoman for the ministry of information in Zagreb, and a member of the Jewish community, insists that Croatia cannot be singled out as the guilty party: 'Everybody in Europe was guilty during the Second World War. You cannot take one population and say they were guilty. The fact is that all over Europe they were slaughtering Jews and not just in Croatia.' The fact that Croatia was one of the few states to implement a policy of genocide against the Jews is deemed to be of no relevance.

The same line is pursued in a pamphlet, published by the ministry of information, which rejects the charge of genocide levelled against the Croatian state: 'In that war the victims came from all nations, because it was



*a bellum omnium contra omnes.*' (Croatia from 1941 to 1991) In other words, in a war of all against all, nobody can be singled out for special blame, since everybody suffered to an equal degree. It is conveniently forgotten that the conflagration that engulfed the whole of Yugoslavia was a direct consequence of the policies pursued by the Ustashe regime.

600 000 were killed there. In 1991, 50 years after the event, the synod of the Serbian Orthodox church said that Jasenovac had claimed the lives of 'not less than 700 000' Serbs.

In his study, *Historical Wastelands: Historical Truth*, published in 1989 by Matica Hrvatska, Tadjman developed the thesis of what he calls the 'Jasenovac myth', claiming it was

Zagreb's glossily illustrated guide to the republic of Croatia makes it sound like the genocide was committed by the Serbs. It barely mentions the Ustashe, but concentrates on supposed atrocities carried out by Serbian forces against Croatian villages. In particular, it draws attention to the alleged postwar genocide against the Croats, when thousands of fleeing Ustashe fighters and supporters were handed over to the partisans by Allied forces. On the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Ustashe state, in 1991, large commemorative services were held in Croatia for the fascists who fell in 1945 near Bleiburg.

### Worse than Hitler

The most consistent attempt to relativise the Ustashe experience has been to suggest that what the communists did in Yugoslavia was far worse. According to Maja Freundlich, a journalist and a member of the Jewish community in Zagreb, communism was a greater evil than fascism: 'Communism was an ideal realisation of Hitler's dreams. Communists made real all that Hitler only dreamt about and never found the right way to do it. He was too violent, too open. They were not. They killed people silently, in the dark.... The communists just took a longer period of time. They were more patient than Hitler was.' By shifting the burden of guilt on to the communists, Freundlich ends up absolving the fascists. By this logic it is possible to justify the actions of the Ustashe, as an understandable response to the threat of communism.

### It's not natural

All in all, the recent Croatian experience calls into question the notion that nationalism is a natural phenomenon. If it is natural, why do politicians and historians devote so much energy to kindling national sentiment? The ease with which national identity has been invented, abandoned and reinvented in Croatia and other parts of Eastern Europe suggests that it is an artificial creation. Far from being the expression of a deeply rooted popular desire for nationhood, the assertion of national identity in Croatia represents an attempt by a new political elite to legitimise its carve up of the Yugoslav market.

The irony is that Croatia has achieved independence only to become a sort of colony of Germany. But many Croatian people seem quite happy to have a whole new history invented for them if they think there are material benefits involved. For the moment, most welcome the idea of being colonised by the strongest economic power in Europe—which only goes to show how ready people are to trade in their national identities. ●

PHOTO: Michael Kramer



For the cameras: the Croatian regime has turned the presidential guard into chocolate soldiers to show off its centuries-old sense of tradition

Franjo Tadjman went further when he declared last year that the Croats were just as much victims as anybody else: 'On the whole, the Croat and Serb people probably suffered equally.' He added that 'if there is any difference, then it is a matter of fractions, not percentages'. Indeed, it is now commonly argued that the suffering of the Croatian people and the loss of Croatian life was greater than that of any other people. 'All in all', concluded Tadjman, 'the Croat people had more victims than the Serbs'.

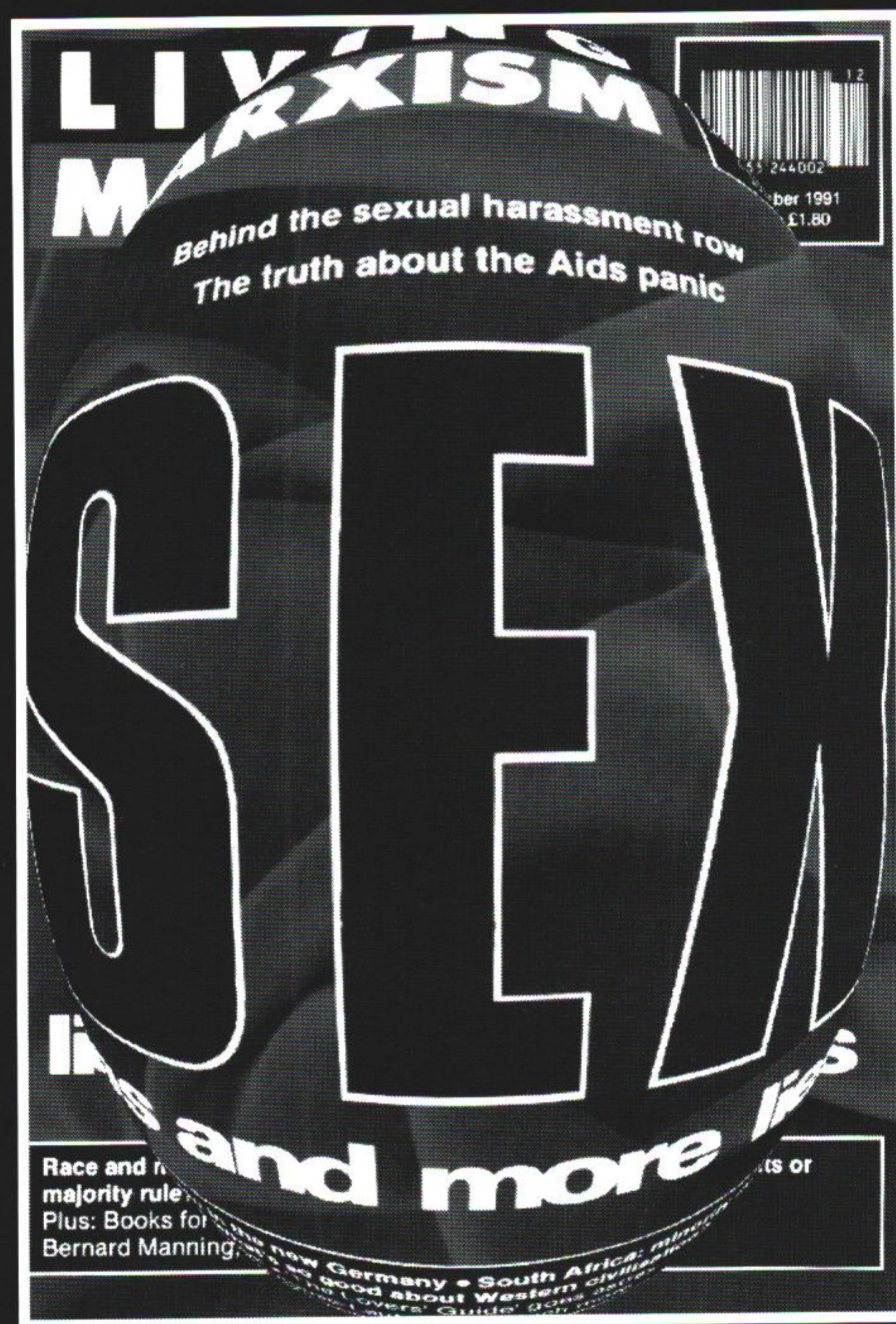
As well as maintaining that the suffering of the Croatian people has been minimised, Zagreb authorities also contend that the suffering of the Serbs, Jews and Gypsies has been exaggerated. A heated debate about the numbers killed on either side has raged for several years.

The most intense haggling over the death toll focuses on the numbers killed at the Jasenovac death camp. In 1945, the Croatian Commission on Crimes of the Occupiers and Collaborators estimated that between 500 000 and

deliberately created by Serbs so they could label the Croats as genocidal. He also said that he was misquoted by Dr Milan Bulajic as saying that 40 000 to 60 000 Serbs were killed at Jasenovac, and that the true figure was from 30 000 to 40 000. In 1991, he again cut back the figure to 30 000. In keeping with this scaling down of the significance of Jasenovac, it looks like the memorial centre at the camp will be closed down on one pretext or another.

Playing the numbers game is one way of minimising the crimes committed by the Independent State of Croatia. Another is to find a counterpart in the alleged crimes of the Serbs. Some revisionists have even suggested that many of the killings were in fact carried out by the Serbs. Lea Baumann has argued that the Serbs were responsible for exterminating the Jews of Serbia during the war. In reality, the extermination of 14 500 Jews in Serbia, 90 per cent of the Serbian Jewish population, was carried out by German army personnel.





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# Still an old wives' tale

Sara Hardy debunks some modern myths about women's status

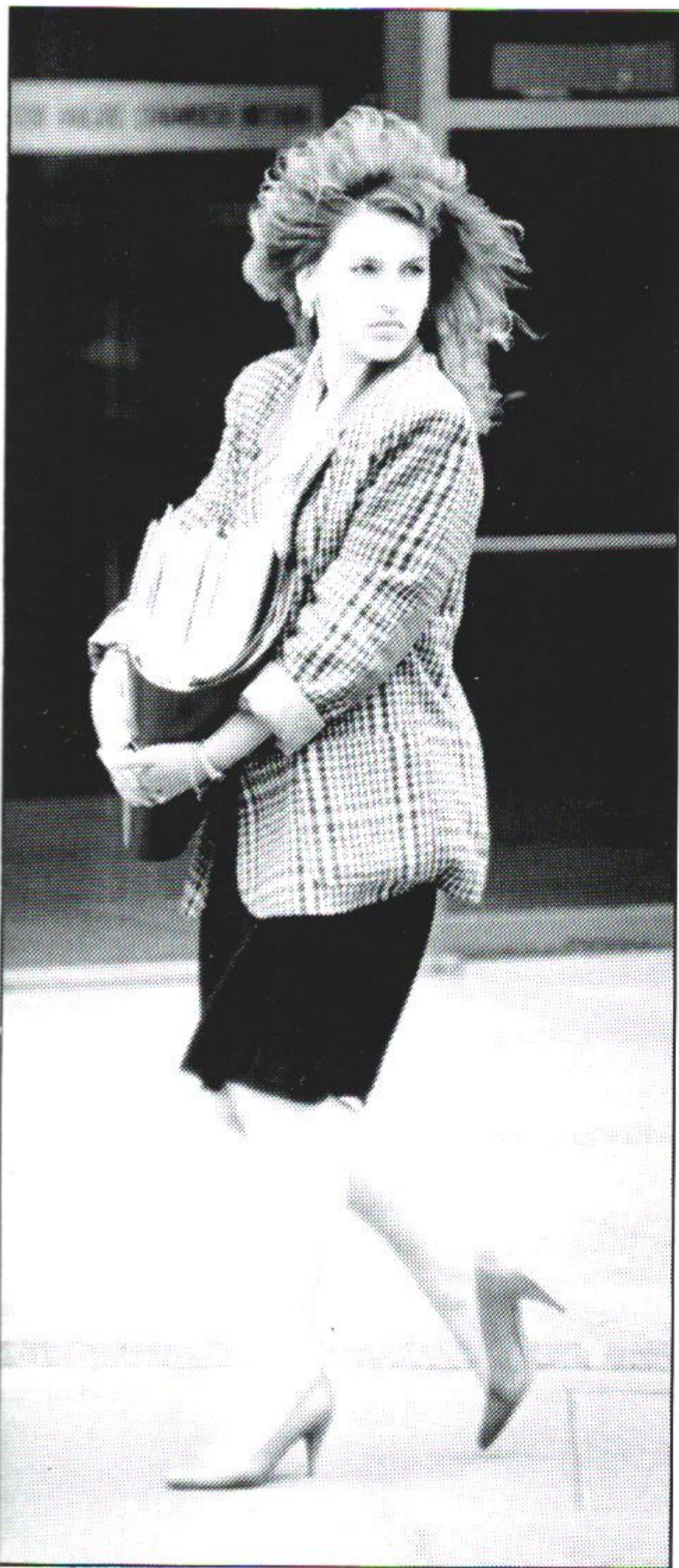


PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

In the wake of Opportunity 2000, the campaign which John Major launched last year, everybody seems to agree that women's role in society is changing for the better.

Opportunity 2000 is a consortium of 61 private employers and 11 public bodies ranging from Tesco to the cabinet office. By the year 2000 it aims to improve the 'quality and quantity of women's participation in the workforce' by challenging prejudice against women at work and organising ways to ensure women get promoted. Major specifically promised that every shortlist for public appointment would soon include a woman.

The implication is that discrimination

against women is a fading relic of the past. It is now depicted as the preserve of particularly backward individuals, while big employers, the government and the law are all working for women's rights. Mechanisms such as job sharing and career breaks are supposed to be opening up new opportunities for women all the time.

These notions are not restricted to stuffed shirts like John Major. They have achieved a much wider resonance, as women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* sing the praises of the New Woman with her smart career, house-handy husband and helpful kids.

So how far does the new wisdom about the rising status of women match the reality of most women's lives today?

#### **CLAIM: 'Women get equal pay'**

**FACT:** Although equal pay legislation has existed since 1975, women's pay remains substantially lower than men's. On average, today women earn 67.6 per cent of the wages of men—and this differential has stayed the same over the past 10 years despite all the laws. This means that few women can have the independence from men that's assumed in the current discussion: the majority of women are still financially reliant on their higher-earning partners. When you earn a third less than your partner, it is not hard to work out which one will stop work to look after children.

#### **CLAIM: 'Women have equal opportunities'**

**FACT:** Women are consigned to the lowest grades and the worst jobs. A recent survey of the NHS—one of the Opportunity 2000 participants, and the biggest employer in the country—found women clustered in the lowest grades, making up 100 per cent of clerical assistants (the lowest grade), and 96 per cent of grade two medical records clerks (the second lowest). The typical woman worker in Britain is more likely to be sitting on a supermarket till in an overall than managing the store dressed in a Chanel suit.

It is a similar picture even among women considered to be high fliers. Take college lecturers. Women make up two thirds of part-time lecturers, and two thirds of the lowest paid college teaching staff. Only two per cent of part-time lecturers qualify for full employment rights, such as maternity rights or sick or redundancy pay. Even in sectors where women go to work in a suit, they occupy lower status jobs than their male counterparts.

#### **CLAIM: 'Women's rights are now protected'**

**FACT:** Women's rights at work remain negotiable. Because so many women work part time, only 54 per cent meet the tough legal requirements on hours of work and length of service which entitle them to employment protection—such as the right to claim that they have been unfairly sacked.

Even maternity rights, assumed by many women to be universal, are heavily qualified. In 1988, 60 per cent of working women qualified for the right to return to work after having a baby (and only 35 per cent did so). Last year one in five pregnant working women got no form of maternity pay. This makes a nonsense of the idea that women can pick up the option of a 'career break'. Most women do not return to the same job after having a baby. Indeed, most have to rely on an alternative source of income—such as their partners.

#### **CLAIM: 'Women do less of the housework these days'**

**FACT:** Although women are going out to work more and more, they still carry the can at home. Half the men in Britain have never prepared a meal, according to the *Star* (13 November 1991). Yet this is far from a joke. Women do an average of 227 minutes of housework a day, about 27 hours a week. When a woman has a paid job, her man averages 2.5 hours of housework a week. This shrinks to an hour a week when their partner is not working. At best, men do a tenth of the housework women do.

On average, women perform 7.7 different domestic tasks each day—cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, etc—while men do just 1.4 tasks. So long as society expects working women to take responsibility for looking after their homes and families, they can't take responsibility for managing offices and factories.

#### **CLAIM: 'Childcare is available for working mothers'**

**FACT:** Childcare is available for only two per cent of under fives, ensuring that women with young children are only able to work part time. There are only about 150 of the much-vaunted workplace nurseries, and these tend to cater for a small number of children. The other alternative for working women with small children is to pass the responsibility to another woman—their own mother. Forty-four per cent of under fives are cared for by their maternal grandmother—making grandmothers the largest provider of childcare in Britain. Women can never play an equal role at work in these circumstances. If a woman has primary responsibility for children and they're sick (or her mother is sick), it's their mother who comes home from work.

Many women may feel sure that their own determination will take them up the career ladder. But the facts of the second-class status which women occupy in Mr Major's Britain tell against this idea. If a woman earns less than her male counterpart, has unequal employment rights and has to take responsibility for housework and childcare, there's only so much a bit of willpower can achieve. ●



## Bernadette Whelan's recent experience has destroyed her illusions in natural childbirth

Perhaps my personal experience is not decisive in the argument for medical intervention as opposed to natural childbirth, but I spent many of my 55 hours of labour planning to get up a lynch mob for the peddlers of do-it-yourself delivery. The legend that you forget the pain when you get the baby is partially true, but my feelings towards the natural childbirth lobby remain as intense as ever. I am writing this because I think *Living Marxism* readers should be forewarned, particularly the women among you who may need to be forearmed.

Pregnant women are easy prey to the plethora of 'experts' on everything from the wherewithal of waterbirth to how to write your birthplan. You'd think that I'd have known better than to fall for that malarkey being a regular reader of *Living Marxism* myself, but I'd never had a baby before. So there I was, taking notes from soothsayers on daytime TV and buying paperbacks on pregnancy and childbirth as though my life depended on it.

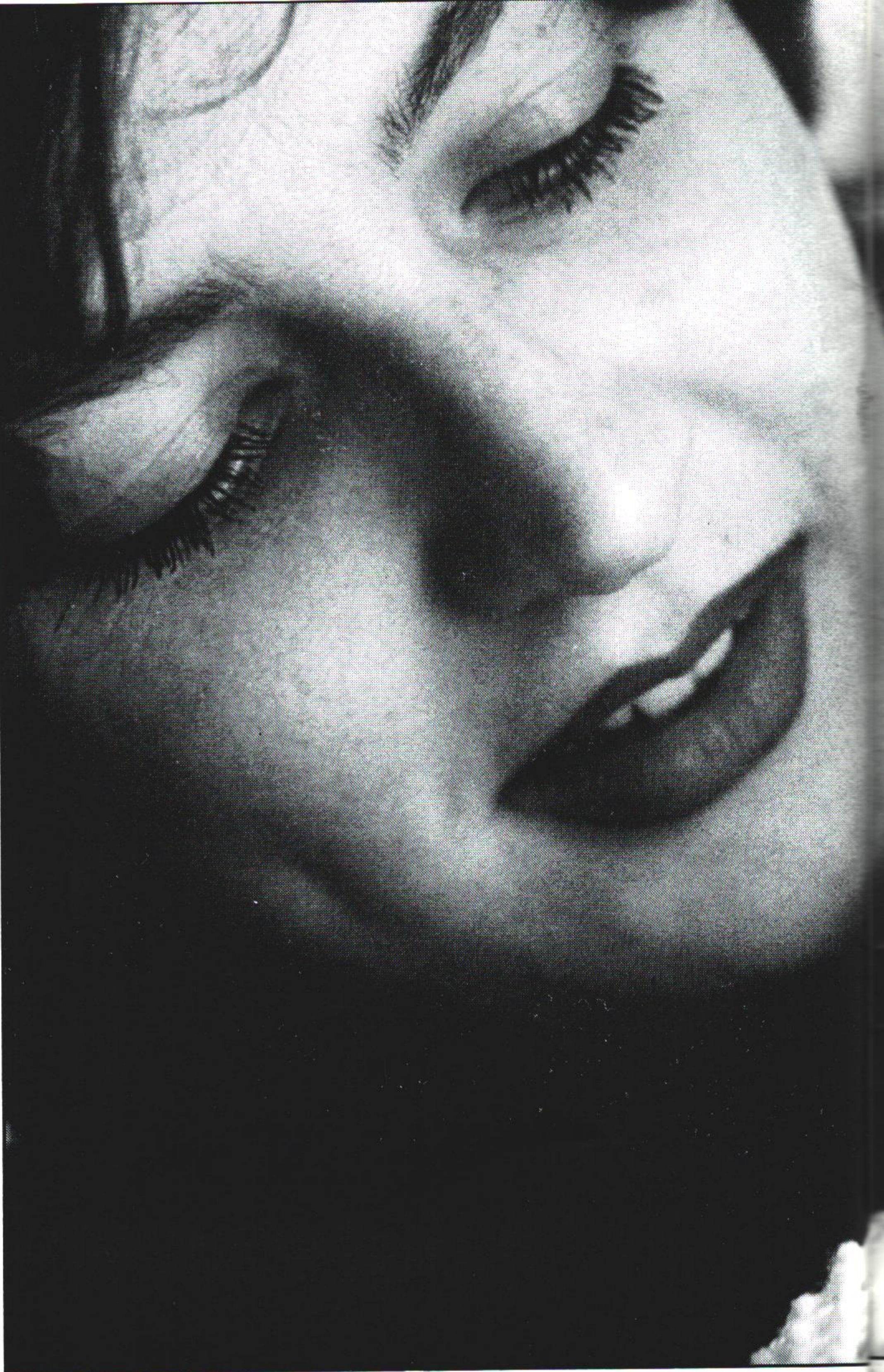
The fashion in this field is to encourage women to 'greet' their labour pains, to get through the whole barbaric process with no pain relief and preferably no medical intervention whatsoever. Otherwise, the accepted wisdom is that you are missing out on a wonderful experience. You also become riddled with guilt at the implication that you are not doing the best thing for your baby.

### Breast pumps

I got a taste of this when I rang the local adviser for the Natural Childbirth Trust. I asked about the times of antenatal classes, but when I told her I couldn't make it on a particular night she snapped, 'Well you won't be free to do things in the evenings when you have your baby, so you may as well start putting it first now'. I later discovered that she was a veteran of the women's movement who saw no contradiction between her erstwhile feminism and her current work brow-beating women into using an electric breast-pump (a modern version of the medieval torture chamber).

It seems this has been one of the few areas where the women's movement has had an impact on the way women are treated in society (ie, they get less treatment). I remember feminists arguing that medical intervention in childbirth is down to male jealousy of our reproductive ability, the medical profession being predominately male. Personally, I can't see it. I was never so jealous of men, barren as they are, as I was after just one hour of labour. As for medical intervention, I didn't care what gender administered it to me, as long as I got it.

In my mother's day you may not have had the option of booking the birthing pool, but at least you could get knocked out without an argument. With hindsight, I can say I would have been better



off listening to my mother than going into hospital thinking I was about to have an uplifting experience. It was uplifting alright, but not what I had in mind. So much for doing the research. In this instance the old wives' tale was nearer the truth. However, I wasn't quite as misled as one woman I met at antenatal class who thought she was going to get through the gristle and gore with a prayer-mat and an irritating nasal chant.

I must own up. To the obvious hilarity of the midwives, I too had booked the birthing pool and hired the Tens machine. To those of you who don't know, Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve

Stimulation (Tens) tickles your spine and is supposed to make you forget the pain, working on a similar principle to acupuncture. I felt like Marie Antoinette with a packet of aspirins. I didn't even have the right batteries.

I called for old-fashioned drugs, followed by an epidural and finally a knock-out general anaesthetic. I ended up with wires, drips, drains, a whole day of induction and a Caesarean section. In my paperback there were several chapters on breathing exercises and positions to adopt during labour; but only one paragraph, which I must have missed, on induction and



# Nature doesn't know best



PHOTO: Michael Kramer

Caesarean birth. Somebody is going to have to pay, and I don't mean a refund from WH Smiths.

In these days of cutbacks in every area of public spending, there is of course a sinister side to the enthusiasm for natural childbirth in the NHS. It's cheaper. The more women who opt for home birth, the better from the budget's point of view. I don't wish to idealise the NHS in my mother's day, because it was her horror stories about women being induced and left to scream in corridors which made me turn to the experts on natural childbirth in the first place. Nonetheless, she got seven days rest in hospital after the

birth, which is a good idea for anyone and was a life-saver for my mother with several other kids at home.

I was told that if I had a normal delivery I would get 48 hours in hospital and would then be turfed out. When I got there, notices in the toilets warned that the hospital did not provide sanitary towels, never mind anything else. If I hadn't had an army of relatives and a New Man ferrying in nappies and taking my washing away I would have been dependent on the charity of midwives. If there are any women out there who heaved a sigh of relief when they heard about

the terrible maternity care at Guy's hospital, thinking it would be better where they were going, my advice is to check it out first. It's the same story wherever you go.

I even learned to regard new policies like continuity of care with a jaundiced eye. This is supposed to be in the interest of patients and of course it was nice to have the same midwives looking after me for the duration of my stay. It is also nice for the hospital administration, because they can rely on the professionalism of the staff to fill the gaps left by lack of resources.

I am indebted to midwives like Maureen, the



student assigned to my ward who stayed to take care of us when she should have gone home, and even spent her dinner break making phone calls to get my baby the special care she needed. It's the worst kind of emotional blackmail to force hospital staff into a personal relationship with patients and then play on their human compassion to screw more work out of them than they are paid to do.

What I learned from childbirth has nothing at all to do with getting in touch with nature. On the contrary, if nature had taken its course with me I would probably have died in childbirth, and so would the baby.

I was in the special care baby unit when I met a friend I had made in early labour. Marina and I had walked the corridors together, trying to move things along, both facing difficult births because we had outsize babies. She asked me what was wrong with my daughter. I was faintly aware of how ridiculous I was being as we were surrounded by babies you could fit in the palm of your hand while mine was obviously robust in comparison. It was only when I finished talking that Marina pointed to the incubator where her baby was lying. His head was bandaged and I could see he was being kept alive by machines. The decision had been taken that she could deliver her baby normally, but his head got stuck in the birth canal for two minutes. The result was that his brain would probably be damaged, if he survived at all.

### What birthplan?

On the night I finally delivered my baby, I had to queue for seven hours for the operating theatre after the decision had been taken that I could have a Caesarean section. From start to finish, the very idea of a birthplan was a joke. Every stage of my labour was determined by the availability of resources. I made two trips to the labour ward before they had a room to take me.

There were six other Caesarean sections on the night Ella May was born. The doctor who operated on me was working hours after the end of his shift. I remember a midwife saying, 'My God, you must be dead on your feet' and lying there thinking 'Blimey, where does that leave me'. I am not questioning the medical expertise of the doctor who decided Marina should have a normal delivery. I have nothing but praise and admiration for the staff at the hospital. But it's obvious that those conditions were not the ideal ones under which to make the right decision for Marina and her baby.

I'm heartily grateful that mine was one of the six Caesarean births that night, although I know in these days of natural childbirth that I'm not supposed to be. The woman in the next bed having her second child enthused that once you'd had a Caesarean section on the NHS, you could elect to have future babies the same way. It's no surprise to me that in America most women who can afford it opt for the knife—in fact 30 per cent of American births are by Caesarean section. They would have us believe that this is for cosmetic reasons alone, but in my experience, after nine months of foreboding that's the last thing on your mind. The first thing is how to get the baby out in one piece, with a minimum of pain and as quickly as possible. And unless you're very lucky, for that you need science and technology, and the more of it that is made available the better.

### Talking posh in the 90s

# Accents speak louder

When Andrew Calcutt went eavesdropping in the bars of Soho, the small talk was as boring as ever, but the accents had changed

**T**hey're back. Strangled vowels, sing-song cadences and crisply enunciated consonants can once again be heard in every bar in Soho. Suddenly it's fashionable to sound like *The Word's* Amanda de Cadenet and her schoolboy brother, known to fellow-Harrovians as 'Bruiser'. Rarely heard in public for nearly 30 years, the plum-in-the-mouth accent has been revived by London's arts and media crowd.

There has always been a small number of gilded youth who think that everyone's daddy speaks like Edward Fox in *Edward and Mrs Simpson*. From the early sixties to the eighties, however, a generation of Amandas and Bruisers learned to flatten their vowels in public or risk mockery. The undisguised voice of the upper class was rarely heard outside boardrooms and private dinner parties. Meanwhile the middle classes adopted an anti-establishment bent, and dropped their aitches to prove it.

Things are different now. Britain's rulers are talking loud and proud, and middle class wannabes are starting to imitate their intonation. The plummy-voiced novices haven't got the patter down yet: their version of talking posh is about as convincing as a painting-by-numbers copy of the Mona Lisa. Accurate or not, however, the in-crowd's plum-in-the-mouth imitation is a sincere form of flattery, and something of a turning-point in British social mores.

As spoken by the media people of Soho, the return of the plum-in-the-mouth suggests that

### Letter from Frankfurt

# Happy birthday

A new film set in Frankfurt depicts the seamy underside of the new Germany. Rob Knight reports

**T**o travel in the sleek, white high-speed ICE trains which connect Frankfurt to the other main German cities is a joy. The seats are comfortable, the carriages roomy and the decor luxurious. Some even have a television screen for each passenger. The buffet areas have sofas, as well as rather better food than their average British rail counterpart.

If you arrive at Frankfurt's Hauptbahnhof in one of these *Vorsprung Durch Technik* wonders then what comes next is even more of a shock. To get to the town centre from the station means going under the main road outside. Beneath this road is a vast underground shopping centre, complete with cafes and supermarkets, bookshops, bakeries and market stalls. The subterranean emporium also has its own citizens. Gathered together in their hundreds in this artificial environment, lit 24 hours a day and permanently protected from the weather, are the dregs of Frankfurt society.

Alcoholics with bloated and bruised faces lean against the walls, beer and cider bottles all

around. Thin young women with ratted and lank hair stare blankly at nothing. Occasionally they talk earnestly to young men in leather jackets, jeans and trainers, who look permanently poised for flight. Scattered on the floor are the overdosed, either semi-conscious or unconscious, with the contents of their stomachs spread around them.

### Underground purgatory

Groups of men are constantly on the move, walking from end to end, or down the escalators and up again, to avoid the attention of the police, who are ever present, ostentatiously armed with pistols and with alsatians chained to their wrists. Occasionally the police drag one of the collapsed victims of drink and drugs away through a half-hidden door to some mysterious place behind the shopping facade. Sometimes, guns drawn, they search the youths.

This underground purgatory is a favourite place for Frankfurt's drug dealers, many of them foreign, and drug addicts, many of them German.

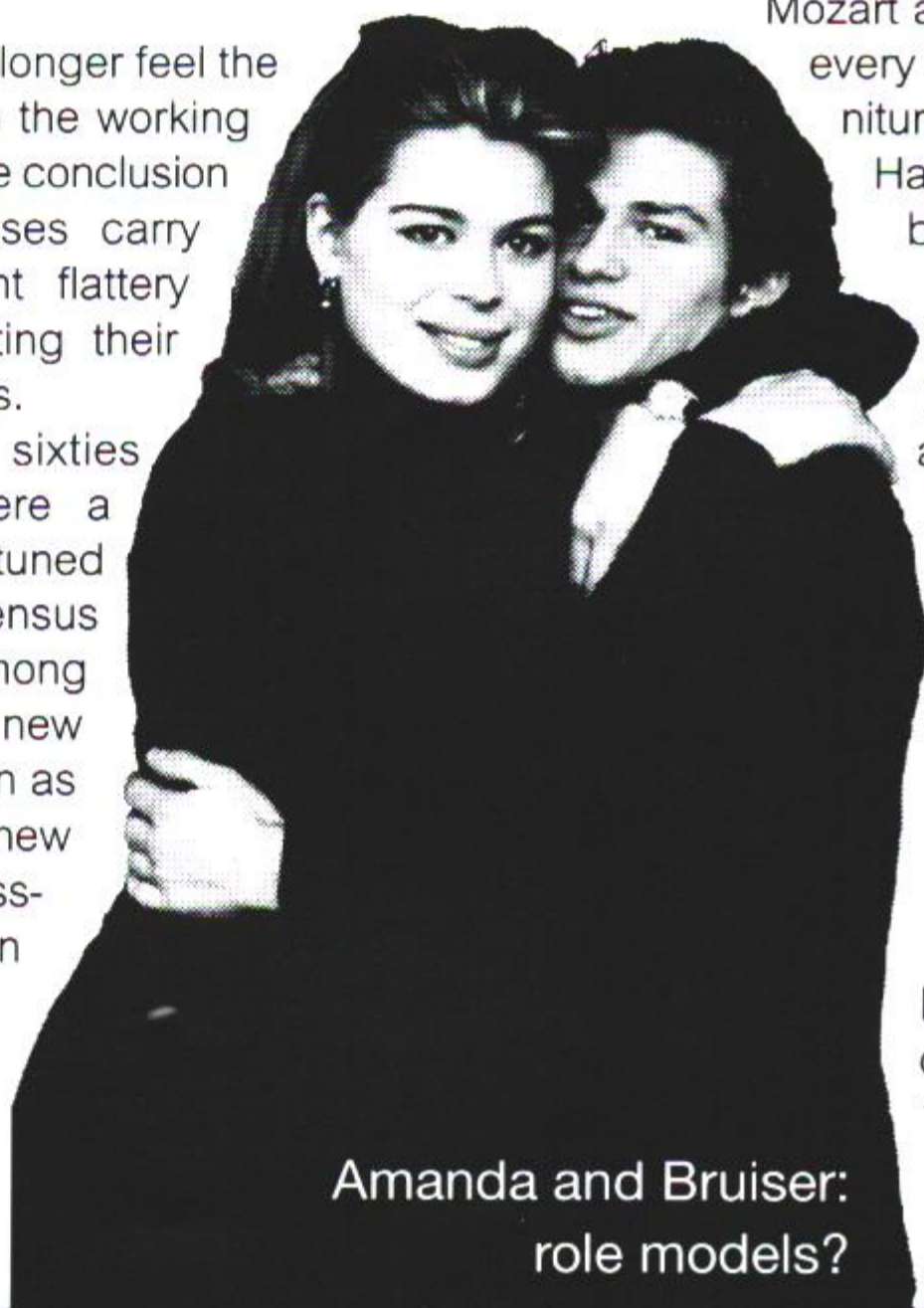


# than words

Britain's middle classes no longer feel the need to keep in touch with the working class. They have come to the conclusion that only the upper classes carry enough weight to warrant flattery and they don't mind putting their mouth where their money is.

In the late fifties and sixties Soho's media people were a newly emerging stratum, 'tuned in' to the notion of consensus society. The high-flyers among them worked in the new medium of television, known as 'the box'. And they had a new accent to match: the 'classless', flattened tones spoken by David Frost.

By the mid-sixties, the 'classless' tone was everywhere. On the pop programme *Ready, Steady, Go* Cathy McGowan spoke



Amanda and Bruiser:  
role models?

youth-Frost. On *Tomorrow's World* James Burke talked science-Frost. Cliff Michelmore was news-Frost. The plummy vowels of the previous age of broadcasting began to sound peculiar.

Frost-speak was the voice of a shortlived vision: a state-educated meritocracy would forge a new Swinging Britain in the white heat of technology; the masses would learn to appreciate

Mozart as well as McCartney; and every house would contain furniture from Terence Conran's Habitat. But the sixties were barely over before the dream became untenable. Frost-speak soon became as unfashionable as the vision of consensus associated with it.

The vision of a unified Britain was quickly dashed, but Soho's arts and media people weren't sure which way to jump. Instead of teaching the people to talk 'classless', the in-crowd learned to talk 'working class'. In the seventies, former public schoolboys like Joe Strummer tried to sound like Ian Dury—the original Essex Man.

Soho bars were packed with Oxbridge graduates speaking in fake Cockney accents about taking their degrees at Middlesex Poly. This was also the age of bar-room revolutionaries. Talking about the 'dialectics of culture' in a Geordie dialect was a winner, especially after the success of man-of-the-people James Bolam in the television series *When the Boat Comes In*.

## Cosmetic Cockney

The coming of the yuppie took some of the cachet away from regional accents. By the mid-eighties, Janet Street-Porter's cosmetic Cockney sounded out-of-date compared to media-yuppies Selina Scott and Anna Ford. But the yuppie was rarely seen in person beyond the confines of the City, and half of them spoke Essex anyway. Only on the brink of the nineties did the young bohemians of Soho really start rehearsing the strangulated speech of the British upper class.

Not everyone was converted immediately. John Major is still trying to evoke the 'classless' tone of Frost-speak. Music journalists continue to speak an Americanised version of sixties Mod. But the Soho in-crowd sounds like it's taking elocution lessons from Bruiser de Cadenet, Lloyd Grossman and *Evening Standard* art critic Brian Sewell. After a few years paying lip-service to the masses, Soho's media-people have returned to the ancient middle class tradition of aping the elite.

# Turk

It is also where the cheap end of the oldest profession goes to avoid the medical checks in the registered brothels. It is a nightmarish place through which thousands of Frankfurt's commuters hurry each day. It is an underworld in every sense.

Coming out into the light is a welcome relief. But the odyssey through the underworld is not over. What comes next is one of the largest red light districts in Europe. Block upon block of shabby buildings containing porn cinemas, porn shops, porn supermarkets as big as Tesco's, peep shows, legalised brothels, strip clubs and video kiosks, promoting and selling sex in all of its ordinary and extraordinary forms. Here too are interspersed clubs, cafes and restaurants where immigrants, mainly Turks, meet together.

Frankfurt's moral clean-up brigade have so far failed to make much impression on this area. The last attempt to do so ended in failure when it was revealed that the city administration was riddled with officials taking bribes from the pimps. A new film, *Happy Birthday Turk*, which

is set in Frankfurt, also explores corruption in the Hauptbahnhof area, only this time it is the police who are in league with the heroin dealers.

The film's hero is Kemal Kayankaya, a private detective, whose parents died when he was a child. He was brought up by a German family and consequently speaks no Turkish, nor has he any idea about Turkish culture. He is hired by a Turkish woman to find her missing husband, which he does two minutes after the man has been stabbed in the back outside a porn cinema. It turns out that the man's father has also been murdered recently and Kayankaya soon discovers why. Both dead men were big time heroin dealers.

The director, Doris Dorrie, uses the familiar structure of the private detective film to explore two themes. One is the endemic racism of German society. Every German who Kayankaya has contact with is racist in some way, especially the police. The other Turkish characters live in squalid conditions in run-down tower blocks. They do menial jobs in which they are patronised by their employers. It is a depressingly accurate reflection of the lives of most of the immigrants here.

## The outsider

The other theme is loss of identity. Kayankaya is an outsider in both German and Turkish society. He compensates for his lack of identity by playing at being a real policeman. He drinks too much and has no stable relationships. The solution put forward by the film for this rootlessness is for him to reclaim his parents' culture. He begins to learn Turkish and starts an affair with his widowed client. He even wears a false moustache to make himself look more typically Turkish. But Kayankaya is so thoroughly westernised that

this is not a convincing solution, even within the context of the film, let alone in the real Germany.

The film is being hailed in some quarters as the beginning of a new wave of German popular cinema. The film industry is planning to expand, as are so many areas of German society, and Dorrie, trained in Hollywood, is seen as one of its greatest hopes. Certainly the film touches on real problems, and it is frequently very funny. But in today's more reactionary climate, Dorrie's sympathies with immigrants might be a barrier to commercial success, although the establishment would have no problem with her message that everybody needs a culture.

## Divided city

What I found most interesting about the film was neither of these themes but the setting, the city itself. It is a place of stark contrasts which the film constantly captures. The red light district ends abruptly at the foot of the first of Frankfurt's giant skyscrapers, home to the big German banks. This is the world of high finance. Frankfurt as Manhattan, the financial centre of the new Europe. Then, just as abruptly, the skyscrapers come to an end and you find yourself in a pleasant shopping area and market, a bit like Nottingham.

The proximity of all these areas, the fact that what is essentially a provincial city can contain such contradictions, makes the contrast between the often squalid living conditions of immigrants, and other losers, and the world of Germany's rich far sharper. Frankfurt is a suitable microcosm for the whole of German society. As bright and shiny on the outside as a skyscraper and as dynamic as a high-speed train, but inside corrupted by exploitation and racism.





## Frank Cottrell-Boyce on TV

**The seeds of Bloody Sunday were not planted at 4pm on 30 January 1972. They had been germinating for months, years, centuries**

# There was nothing 'balanced' about Bloody Sunday

His death was the most witnessed in history but no one saw who did it. It's enough to make you doubt the possibility of Truth. The curious thing about Kennedy assassination theories is that they are cumulative. LBJ does not oust the Mafia, the Military Industrial Complex or the Communists. He is added to the list. The conspiracy itself grows bigger and bigger until it is almost an abstraction, a kind of paranoid Original Sin, implicating all of us.

Of course this leaves Kennedy himself as the Christ-like Redeemer and Sacrifice. And in Oliver Stone's *JFK* that is pretty much the line on Bonking Jack. He is, says Hamlet Stone, 'the strong father America lost'. If he had lived, Vietnam would never have happened and America would have retained her innocence. His death was the nation's Fall from Grace.

A similar set of ideas have grown up around Bloody Sunday. When, on 30 January 1972, the Parachute Regiment opened fire on a peaceful civil rights march in Derry, they killed not only 14 people but also all hopes of a negotiated political settlement in Ireland. The civil rights movement was stopped dead in its tracks. The war began.

Two television documentaries marked this depressing twentieth anniversary. The first told the story from the point of view of the marchers and the people of Derry. It went out in Channel 4's 'viewer-led current affairs' slot, *Free For All*. It combined a brisk, informative account of the events themselves with some mature and moving reflections on their legacy. The other examined the soldiers' role. It was part of the BBC's *Inside Story* series and it was a shabby, inarticulate, shameful little thing.

*Inside Story* presented itself as an investigation into the Truth of what happened on that day. The interviewer—Peter Taylor—badgered the commanding officer, Colonel Derek Wilford, about whether he had allowed his men to get out of control, whether he had himself exceeded his orders. The Colonel squirmed impressively. But asking Wilford what went wrong is about as useful as asking the bullets if they were speeding.

The Paras' training is, to quote a Para, 'don't go for cover, find a target'. On that day they found 14, none of them armed, most of them running away, one of them holding up a white handkerchief while trying to help a dying friend. Violence is a messy, imprecise business. One of the 'highly trained' soldiers fired 18 rounds at a window without hitting it (though he did waste a few passers-by). That is just the way it is.

The question is not, 'Did the Paras behave themselves?' but what they were doing there, policing a huge, 'carnival-like' peaceful protest? The seeds of

Bloody Sunday were not planted at 4pm on 30 January 1972. They had been germinating for months, years, centuries. But the nearest *Inside Story* got to a context was some footage of the soldiers being baited by children at Aggro Corner. Those poor squaddies, no wonder their tempers were so short. Colonel Wilford said he was having trouble with his conscience; another Para said he felt very sorry.

Frankly, as they say in Hollywood, twinges of conscience is not the story. The story is 14 dead. The C4 documentary dismissed the whole debate about orders and conduct in one brilliant phrase: 'If the deaths were not sanctioned in advance, they certainly were in retrospect by the Widgery Inquiry.'

The Widgery Inquiry was a 'judicial humiliation', an announcement of the fact that Irish people would not be protected by British justice. Perversely, *Inside Story* set itself more or less the same fatuous terms as Widgery. But where Widgery was just a pack of lies, *Inside Story* was something much worse. *Inside Story* was 'balanced'. Lies admit the possibility of Truth. 'Balance' suggests that everything is a matter of opinion. In the name of balance, Taylor gave the bereaved as bad a time as the killers.

He asked each of them if those they had lost had been armed. They all said no, of course. But they should never have been asked. It is an established fact that none of them was armed. Good journalism is about establishing facts, wherever possible. To ask these people this question was to suggest that there was room for doubt or a need for us to take their word. There was not.

Nor did Taylor attempt to establish the nature of the march itself. During the interview with Wilford, Taylor was happy to refer to 'hooligans' and 'rioters'. Then we cut to interviews with the marchers themselves and discovered that they were doctors, cardinals and so on. The BBC's inability to decide on an appropriate vocabulary was at its most amusing when talking about Northern Ireland itself. Of course they had to call Derry Londonderry but they could not quite bring themselves to say, 'province'. In the end they opted for the tellingly fairytale 'realm'.

The BBC swapped investigative journalism for the canvassing of opinions some time during the 1984-85 miners' strike. When the story went out that coal faces were flooding, they did not attempt to find out whether they were or not but simply interviewed miners on one hand and bosses on the other. It was like giving the racing results based on a poll of the punters instead of on the photo finish. Here the BBC came over as cynical and idle. In the case of Bloody Sunday, however, the effect is far more pernicious.

One of the ways in which successive British



governments have excused their lack of interest in Ireland is by flogging the myth of the mysterious, medieval and passionate Irish nation. *Inside Story* played its part in reaffirming this myth. In laying out all these disparate opinions, it gave the impression that you could never get to the bottom of all this, that it was all some great enigma that could never be solved. Peter Taylor emerged as the bewildered, defeated British onlooker. You try to be rational but where does it get you?

The 'documentary' ended with a shot of rosary beads wrapped round a tombstone in the twilight and lots of waffle about tragedy, as though it was all the fault of three witches on a blasted heath. It would have looked OK in *JFK* but film directors are allowed to create myths, journalists should be challenging them.

*Inside Story* demonstrated once and for all that the idea of 'balance' is not just pusillanimous, it is degrading. Beyond the miasma of hyper-reality and media effect, some things really do happen in the real world. Some people really did die and other people lost their fathers, and not in a metaphor or a literary allusion but in blood and forever.

BBC 2 is currently showing *Quantum Leap*, a rivetingly charming time travel series in which our hero goes back down the time lines and tries to alter events, preventing suicides, murders, tragic misunderstandings and so on. This is against all the conventions of time travel literature, where the slightest alteration in the past produces huge variations in the present.

By coincidence, in the week of Bloody Sunday and *JFK*, *Quantum Leap* dealt with a sixties assassination, intended as an anti-Vietnam protest. Our hero stops the bomb going off, saves the girl, teaches her about peaceful protest and goes on his way. Somehow the present is no different for the past being made more pleasant. It seems to suggest that the dreadful martyrdoms do not change that much, that if JFK had lived, America would be just as bad; that if the soldiers had behaved better on Bloody Sunday, they would still be there, just as they are now.

To quote one of the wives in *Free For All*, 'I used to think that God had taken him from me, but now I realise it was just a British soldier'. There is a difference between Fate and History. Assassinations and murders are terrible and they exercise their influence but they are not the Fall. They are human events and they have to be coped with by humans, not Gods.

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk





Andrea Mantegna

# The man behind the myths

An exhibition of the work of Andrea Mantegna is on show at the Royal Academy. Alan Harding assesses this Renaissance man

Andrea Mantegna was regarded by his contemporaries as the greatest living artist. This was no mean achievement given that his working life spanned the last half of the fifteenth century, the golden age of Renaissance painting. At the beginning of Mantegna's career both Botticelli and Piero della Francesca were active. At the turn of the century, Leonardo, Michaelangelo and Raphael were working. But by the end of his career, Mantegna's popularity was waning and he was regarded as old-fashioned.

Writing in the 1550s, in his *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari summarised the reasons for this turnaround. He cited the artist's preoccupation with antiquity, especially with classical sculpture and ruins, a preoccupation which owed as much to Mantegna's harsh character and his bleak view of humanity as it did to intellectual conviction. He also drew attention to the artist's technical mastery and consummate draughtsmanship, which, when allied to Mantegna's austere vision, further distanced the observer through its uncompromising attention to detail. These observations have been repeated by critics ever since.

Mantegna's technical accomplishment is unquestionable. The intensity of his perspective and the brooding quality of his rocky landscapes are inescapable. We may even conclude from his litigious bent, and from the harsh features of the sculpted head of Mantegna which opens the exhibition, that he was not the most approachable of men. Yet none

of this explains Mantegna's special qualities nor his pivotal position in the artistic output of the Renaissance.

This exhibition ends with a Latin text saying 'Ignorance is always opposed to virtue'. It is an accurate summation of Mantegna's attitude to his own work. In order for ignorance to be vanquished, the commitment to honesty, observation and technical innovation had to be absolute. Throughout his long career, Mantegna never ceased to experiment and search for new solutions. He perfected the Florentine practice of engraving. He invented *grisaille* (a painting technique that imitated bas relief sculpture). And he gave an immediacy and concentration to his work through his mastery of perspective and through the low point of vision which he often adopted.

The pursuit of virtue was also a search for order. In contrast, ignorance meant disorder. Virtue was technical mastery and the Roman ideal of civic responsibility and self discipline. While the courts of the Renaissance princelings, such as the Gonzagas of Mantua who employed

himself. Just look at the brusque treatment of the crowd by the military in 'Saint James Led to Execution'. Harmony cannot be superimposed on life through art in order to obscure reality. Nor can there be an easy reconciliation between human suffering and salvation. Mantegna is uncompromising, not because there is nothing to be done, but because man must act: virtue must dispel ignorance.

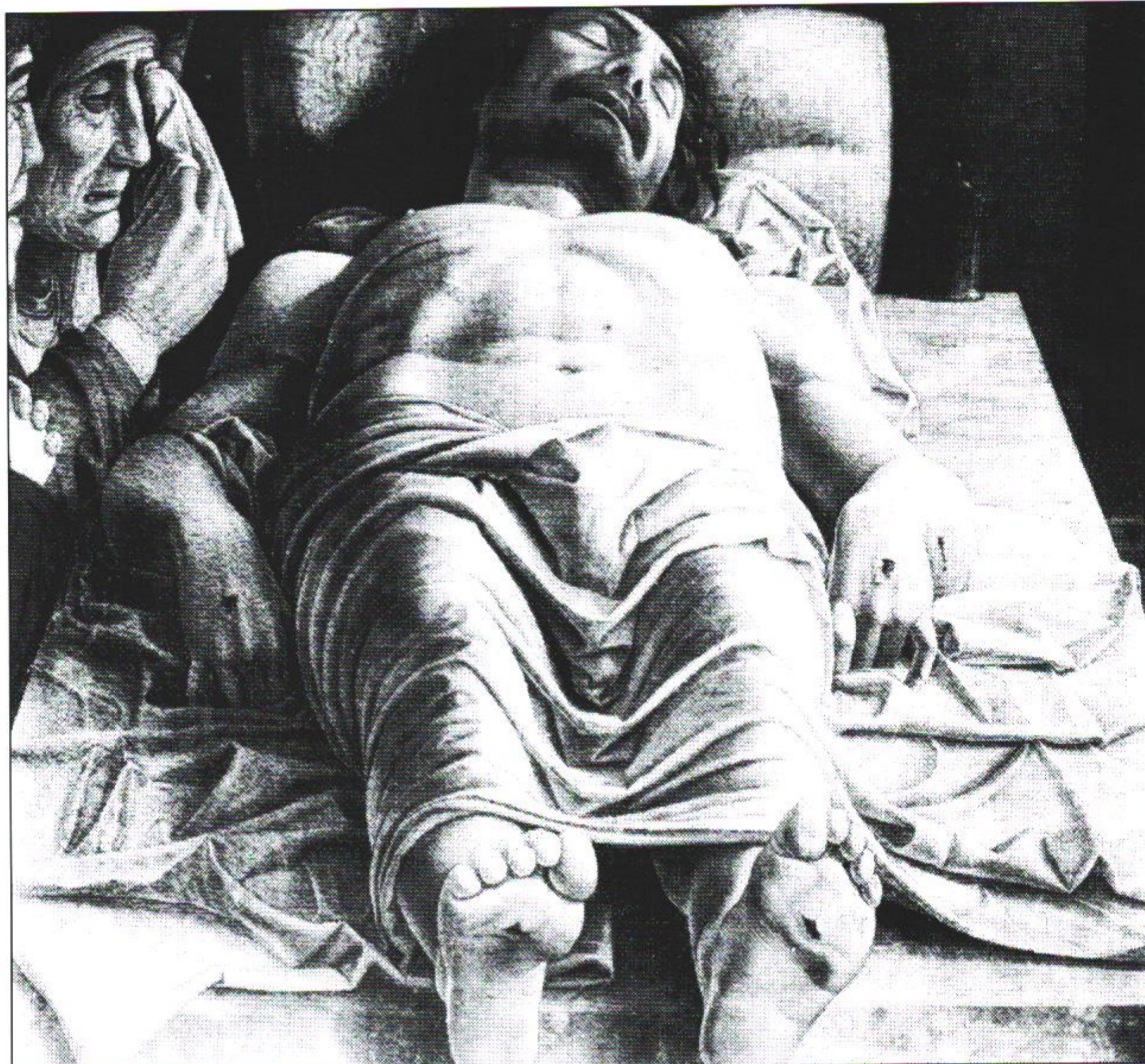
But it would be wrong to echo the generations of critics who have said that there is no pity in Mantegna. On the contrary, Mantegna says 'Oh the pity of it'. There is not a jot of sentimentality in Mantegna. There is no blurring of the edges in emotional or pictorial terms. In this he is distinguished from the great painters who superseded him in critical estimation.

Mantegna did not wear his heart on his sleeve. But as this exhibition demonstrates, he could express profound tenderness. The placing of a Madonna's hand on the child achieves the poignancy of the relationship without fuss or flurry. Nor is Mantegna humourless. On the

contrary, his invention and observation often make for wit and hilarity, for example in 'Bacchanal with a Wine Vat' and 'Bacchanal with Silenus'.

Mantegna sought order, but could not find it either in classical antiquity or Christian redemption. These sentiments which are characteristic features of the early Renaissance conflict with a more secular, humanist aspiration which also enlivens Mantegna's life and work. The pessimism instilled by the human condition is challenged by the optimism engendered by the human spirit.

The Royal Academy exhibition is a major contribution to our understanding of the imagination of an age and one of its major artists. As I sit and think about his work, I can think of at least a dozen pieces, any one



Lamentation over the Dead Christ

Mantegna, paid lip-service to an idealised conception of the Roman *civis*, their political practice was violent and arbitrary. Life was nasty, brutish and short.

When Mantegna depicts this reality with the honesty that his attitude demanded, and his technique allowed, he seems cold and even brutal

of which I would pay the full admission price to see again. There are not many painters you can say that about.

\* Andrea Mantegna: Painter, Draughtsman and Printmaker of the Italian Renaissance is showing at the Royal Academy until 5 April.



# MARXIST

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

The debate around the five hundredth anniversary commemoration of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America tells us more about the present than the past, suggests Paola Martos

### Columbus: rediscovering America

Books discussed in this article include:

**The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy,**

Kirkpatrick Sale, Hodder & Stoughton, £17.95 hbk

**Columbus: His Enterprise,** Hans Koning, Latin American Bureau, £4.99 pbk

**Faces of Latin America,** Duncan Green, Latin American Bureau, £8.99 pbk

**In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage,**

David Henige, University of Arizona Press, \$24.95 hbk

**The Curse of Columbus: Race & Class,** Vol33 No3, January/March 1992, £4 pbk

The year 1992 is turning out to be one of unremitting economic gloom and political worry for the Western elites. It should come as no surprise then that some should try to compensate for the lacklustre present by focusing on a glorious past. One such opportunity to project a sense of a shared national history at a time when social cohesion is under strain is provided by the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. The quincentenary commemoration allows the US establishment to promote Columbus as an enduring symbol of the individual pioneering ethos that made America great.

But this flattering view of the American spirit is being challenged by an alliance of liberals, ethnic minorities and interest groups who insist on denouncing Columbus as a false hero. The charges against Columbus range from racism and genocide to sexism and environmental terrorism. The anti-Columbus lobby is calling into question the official interpretation by arguing that the year 1492 opened an era not of discovery but of genocide, not of freedom but of slavery, not of progress but of barbarism. One of the main liberal contributors to the debate, Hans Koning, describes Columbus as 'a man greedy in large and in small ways, cruel in petty things and on a continental scale' (*Columbus: His Enterprise*, p7). One American protester was more scathing, saying that Columbus 'makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent' (quoted in *Economist*, 21 December 1991).

What is striking about the arguments of the anti-

Columbus faction is their lack of originality. The modern-day critics of Columbus have not unearthed any new evidence about what happened in 1492, but are simply reinterpreting some well-known facts. The barbaric treatment meted out to the American Indians by the Spanish Empire, for instance, has been condemned ever since Bartolomé de las Casas, a Catholic priest who travelled with Columbus, took up their cause. No significant new facts have been brought to light about the horrors of conquest which the Spanish themselves described without shame.

The absence of any new revelations about 1492 begs the question why is Columbus being indicted 500 years after the event? The ferocity of the contemporary debate about the merits or crimes of Columbus cannot be understood simply in the terms set out by the protagonists on either side. A comparison with the four hundredth anniversary celebrations of 1892 suggests that the current debate has less to do with what happened in 1492 and more to do with what is happening in 1992.

Antonín Dvorák's Symphony No9, 'From the New World', captured the mood of energy and optimism that accompanied the celebrations 100 years ago. Perhaps the key event to commemorate the discovery was the World's Columbian Exposition, organised in Chicago as part of the celebrations. Thirty times the size of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1855, it attracted 24m visitors in a country of just 63m inhabitants. The Exposition's ►



publicists were not coy about promoting America's greatness: 'All the marvels of the world, and the products of all the master geniuses in art and invention, are gathered there to delight and instruct—a very panorama of the possibilities of human ingenuities and persistent effort.' (Quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise*, p353)

The purpose of the 1892 celebrations was not to remember the past but to celebrate the achievements of a country that had come a long way since 1492. There was no nostalgia for the past, because the future seemed to have so much to offer. Washington Irving's then popular biography of Columbus, written in 1828, remarked that, 'amidst the afflictions of his age and the cares of penury', Columbus would have been consoled if he could have imagined 'the splendid empires which were to spread over the beautiful world he had discovered' (*The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*). America was proud of its past achievements and confident about the future.

The contrast with this year's five hundredth anniversary is stark. This time around, history, and having the correct interpretation of it, is the issue. For the American right, the Columbus anniversary is being used to proclaim the contemporary relevance of the American Dream. Of

## The national myths propagated by the right no longer bear any relation to the reality of life for a growing number of Americans

course, history has always been used to justify and promote a particular view of contemporary society. David Henige, for instance, understands that 'a serene but unexamined belief in the actuality of the recorded past is necessary to an acceptable present' (*In Search of Columbus*). But what is new today is that, unlike in 1892, a 'serene belief' in America's national myths is very unfashionable.

This is not surprising, considering how much things have changed in America's recent past. America is a nation in decline, best symbolised by George Bush being sick and passing out while on his car-selling visit to Japan. America is no longer the place where your dreams come true. Chicago, which hoped to match its performance of 1892, entered the contest to host the 1992 World's Fair. Unable to raise enough funds, it was beaten to it by Seville, capital of poverty-stricken Andalusia in Spain.

The current polemic reveals nothing about the past, but much about the present failures of American society. The national myths propagated by the right no longer bear any relation to the reality of life for a growing number of

Americans. The US elite is less and less able to satisfy the expectations of the American people, and to unite them behind a common vision of national achievement. As the Clarence Thomas case and many recent public controversies have shown, American society is profoundly divided along ethnic and racial lines.

The deterioration of the economic and social fabric, and the marginalisation of black and ethnic groups, has encouraged a reassessment of the national myths that have shaped the nation's identity. Each section of society now claims the right to a history exclusive to their group. While the establishment celebrates Columbus as a national hero, dissatisfied minorities attack the official national history and insist that Columbus is a hero only for Americans of white European descent.

Barbara Ransby, an African-American historian, applauds the 'efforts underway to reclaim, inch by inch, the confiscated territory which is our history' ('Columbus and the making of historical myth', *Race & Class*, Vol33 No3, January/March 1992). By contesting the official interpretation of American history, ethnic minority groups are fighting for a piece of the action and staking a claim to society's resources today.

In one sense, the backlash against the Columbus quincentenary is an understandable reaction to an insensitive official history. Unfortunately, the critics of Columbus have fallen into the trap of plundering the past in order to justify their own claims in the present. In doing so they have reproduced in a different form many of the prejudices which imbue the orthodox conservative historiography. Let's look in more detail at the charges levelled against Columbus and their implications for today.

Whereas for the right, Columbus is revered as the harbinger of progress, for radicals like Hazel Walters he was 'the bringer of catastrophe on an exponential scale' (*Race & Class*, pV). According to the left and liberal orthodoxy, Columbus did not simply pave the way for the decimation of the Americas, his discovery also laid the foundations for the practice of modern racism and the despoliation of the environment.

To the manufactured myth of Columbus as the brave visionary who set sail on an unknown course and discovered a new world, Barbara Ransby counterposes the 'real' legacy of Columbus: 'A bloody legacy of rape, pillage and plunder.' (p79) In fact, there is a tendency among his critics to blame Columbus for *everything* bad about the modern world. Duncan Green, in his survey of contemporary Latin America, accuses Columbus of creating 'the most unequal continent in the world'. He is blamed for the poverty, squalor, drugs, misery and environmental disaster afflicting Latin America today, which lets the US imperialists who are really responsible for destroying the continent off the hook very nicely.

Two charges in particular which have been levelled against Columbus are off the mark. The first is that Columbus was a racist who carried out genocide against



the native peoples of the Americas. The second is that Columbus was an environmental imperialist who destroyed the natural environment of the Americas.

Many radical writers such as Hans Koning argue that Columbus was the first in a long line of European racists,

## In rejecting the legacy of Columbus, his adversaries are suggesting that historical change can only end in disaster

arriving in a paradisiacal America only to sow the seeds of prejudice. But it is absurd to apply today's political concepts to a society so obviously different from ours, or even to imagine that the concerns of the twentieth century were to be found in the fifteenth century.

Columbus and his contemporaries were certainly brutal, but they cannot be condemned retrospectively as racists. Racism as a political category only acquires meaning in modern capitalist society alongside the notion of equality. In Columbus' times, there was no such thing as equality nor any conceptualisation of equality. Before the development of capitalism it was taken for granted that society was by nature unequal.

The treatment of the American Indians at the hands of the early Spanish Empire has to be examined according to the specific social relations that prevailed at the time. In particular, their experiences were shaped by the changes brought about in America's economic life. Slavery, forced labour, expulsion from the land—these are all symptoms not of racist prejudice, but of the creation of the conditions for capitalism.

Far from being exclusive to colonial America, these phenomena were evident throughout Europe. In 1547, for instance, Edward VI ordained that, in England, 'If anybody refuses to work, he shall be condemned as a slave to the person who has denounced him as an idler. The master shall feed his slave on bread and water, weak broth and such refuse meat as he thinks fit. He has the right to do any work, no matter how disgusting, with whip and chains.... If the slave is absent a fortnight, he is condemned to slavery for life and is to be branded on forehead or back with the letter S' (quoted in K Marx, *Capital*, Vol1, 1983, p686). The degradation of the American Indians was not unique. This was the lot of millions of Europeans throughout the Middle Ages.

Columbus has also been accused of another modern sin: a lack of respect for the environment. Kirkpatrick Sale argues that Columbus' attitude to nature was typical of the dastardly European character: 'A Europe that [was] in thought and deed estranged from its natural environment and had for several thousand years been engaged in depleting and destroying the lands and waters it depended

on.' (*The Conquest of Paradise*, p74). Sale's argument is that the Renaissance, by placing human reason at the centre of everything, subordinated the needs of nature to the needs of man.

In this discussion, Columbus' detractors are again guilty of imposing the preoccupations of the present on to the past. Sale is puzzled that fifteenth century Europe did not spend much time praising the wonders of the natural world. He is astonished that Columbus was not that impressed by the virginal beauty of the New World. But this only displays an ignorance of the forces that shaped the outlook of the age of Columbus.

Renaissance man's view of nature was, of necessity, very different from that of today. Renaissance man wanted to dominate nature because he was constantly threatened by it. Throughout the long medieval period, natural forces had brought about famine, pestilence and disease. In the hundred years following 1492, for instance, there were no less than 11 epidemics and countless locust plagues, droughts and bad harvests in Spain. The Spanish population decreased by between seven and 10 per cent in the first part of the sixteenth century due to epidemics alone.

In societies at the mercy of these forces, nature was not thought of as the place to spend a holiday. Columbus' contemporaries could not but feel terrified of nature, and aspire to control it. Renaissance humanism, with its aspiration for man to control his own destiny and to free himself from the impositions of a higher authority whether God or Nature, was therefore a liberating project.

According to Sale, man's attempt to shape the world in his own image was a step backwards. In fact, it was the rationalist and humanist spirit of the Renaissance, and of the Enlightenment later on, that laid the basis for the affirmation of social justice and equality. Bartolomé de las Casas, the Spanish priest who did so much in Columbus' time to defend the Indians from the outrages of the Spanish authorities, argued that rationalism was the basis for the Indians' claim to equal rights: 'All the peoples of the world are men, and there is only one definition of each and every man, and that is that he is rational.' (Quoted in JH Elliot, 'The world after Columbus', *New York Review of Books*, 10 October 1991).

The arguments of the anti-Columbus lobby are not just ridiculous, they are also reactionary. In rejecting the legacy of Columbus' discovery of America his adversaries are suggesting that historical change can only end in disaster. Indeed, this view is implicit and sometimes explicit in the arguments of the liberal opponents of the quincentenary celebrations. Most contributions to the debate call into question the notion of progress. Thus Barbara Ransby complains that Columbus' 'weaknesses, mistakes and horrid transgressions are all excused in the name of progress' (*Race & Class*, p85).

Today's liberals are using the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America to reinterpret ►



the meaning of the Renaissance which gave birth to liberalism itself. The parallels with the two hundredth anniversary of the 1789 French Revolution, which became the occasion for the right to rubbish its own revolutionary legacy, are striking. Both anniversaries

past at a time when they have little to offer in the present, is still upholding the progressive legacy of Columbus. The left, meanwhile, is inventing its own mythical past and attacking the idea of progress.

This obsession with the past on the part of liberal America is the mirror image of the right's attachment to traditional values. Both views reveal a fear of change. Both see historical development as a process of degeneration which should be reversed. The controversy between conservatives and liberals is no longer a struggle between tradition and progress, but between two different schools of myth-making.

Both sides in this debate are just about as bad as each other. For the right, Columbus is a useful vehicle for claiming that, 500 years later, the spirit of enterprise lives on in America. Ironically, the liberals' concern to establish their own version of the past at the expense of challenging the present allows the right to get off the hook at a time when the degenerate and destructive character of capitalist society is more apparent than ever.

The Columbus debate has consequences beyond the rewriting of American history. Most importantly, the left's abandonment of the idea of change and progress is a recipe for inactivity and despair in the face of the problems facing humanity today. If change only ends in disaster as the left insists, what is the point of trying to challenge the present system? The rejection of change inevitably leads to fatalism and passivity. It means reconciling ourselves to the status quo.

Furthermore, blaming the past for America's problems only absolves the present. By focusing on the crimes of Columbus 500 years ago, the liberals allow America's modern-day rulers to escape criticism. In 1992, while the left is preoccupied with calculating how many Indians died in 1492, the quarter of a million Iraqis who died during last year's Gulf War hardly merit a mention.

So how should we regard the Columbus quinquennial? The right response to the establishment's celebration of history cannot be to fall into the trap of inventing an alternative past. The past, after all, provides little cause for celebration—which is why the world needs to escape from it as fast as possible.

The alternative to living in the past is to encourage people's aspirations for a better future. Neither the present, nor still less the past, should be accepted as the limit to expectations: that would mean abandoning any possibility of human betterment. Rather than rejecting humanity's potential for change, society should be encouraging a belief in the efficacy of human activity as the motor of progress. Those who dismiss human intervention in our own history are giving up the only hope of creating a new world.

The question of whether or not the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America should be celebrated is ultimately irrelevant. Creating a new world cannot be left to the old one.

## The controversy between conservatives and liberals is no longer a struggle between tradition and progress, but between two different schools of myth-making

demonstrate that conservatives and liberals alike are rejecting their own previous contribution to historical change.

The Columbus controversy reveals how far the liberal left has gone in rejecting liberal principles such as rationalism and progress. Instead, liberals now appear to favour a regression to the past; in Kirkpatrick Sale's case, a return to the literally prehistoric conditions that existed in America before Columbus' arrival. Implicit in the liberal attack on Columbus is the notion that after the discovery things changed *for the worse*; that the primitive civilisations that existed before were somehow superior, and that what came after was definitely inferior.

The past 500 years of history are being rubbished. The implication is that pre-capitalist society, with its superstitions and degradations, was preferable to the changes introduced by the discovery; that the ignorance and scarcity of primitive life were more valuable than science, reason and the fulfilment of our material needs. The dependence of primitive society on nature is seen as a 'spiritual earth-relationship'. Any discussion of the barbaric practices and inhuman conditions of those societies is omitted, in favour of celebrating the 'noble savage' at peace with his environment. This idealisation of the past amounts to a reactionary celebration of backwardness, and a denial of humanity's potential to better itself.

The development of transatlantic capitalism, made possible by the link forged by Columbus between the Old and New Worlds, was a violent process both for Europe and America. The process of change created losers as well as winners. Nevertheless, it represented a major step forward in the development of society. The economic and social changes brought about by capitalism made possible, for the first time ever, the removal of material want. That possibility did not exist either in medieval Europe or in pre-Columbian America. All that existed was the degradation of life in a society where humans had no control over their own existence.

In their embrace of the past, liberals are becoming more conservative than the conservatives themselves. The right, concerned with projecting a positive image of the



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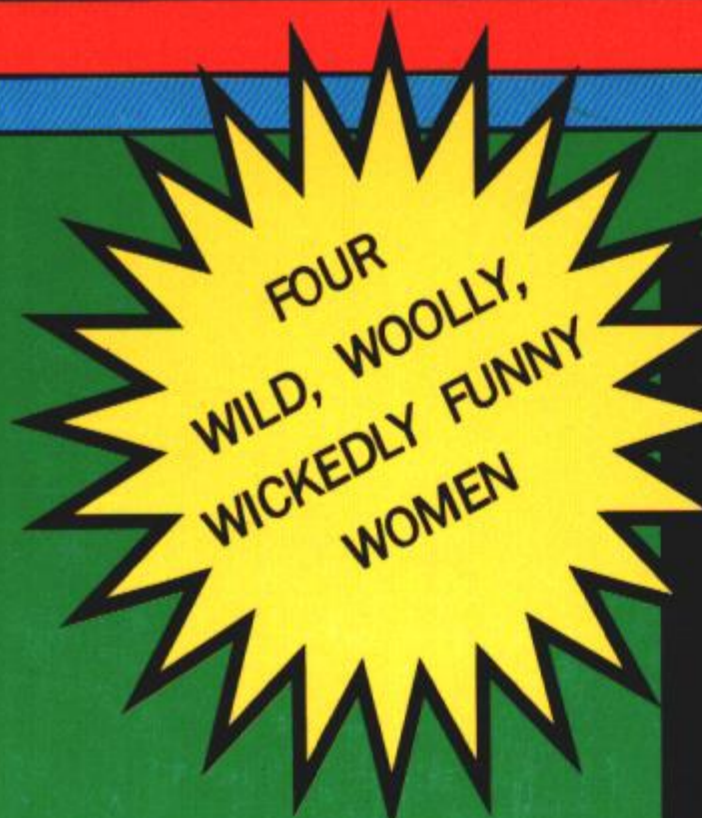
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