

LIVING MARXISM



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Abolish the Monarchy

Post-election debate ● 'Dependency culture' ● US race riots
Homophobia ● Cosmology ● Scotland ● Springsteen ● Bacon

contents

- 4 Editorial**
- 6 Letters**
- 8 Race and the LA riots**
Linda Ryan
- 10 Myth of homophobia**
Peter Ray
- 12 The real dependency culture**
Helen Simons
- 16 Lloyd's: welfare for the wealthy**
Phil Murphy
- 19 Ann Bradley**
- 20 Abolish the monarchy**
Mick Hume
- 24 Towards 2000**
- 26 The exhaustion of British politics** *Frank Richards*
- 30 Scotland's opposition**
Kirk Williams
- 32 Labour elects a loser**
Mike Freeman
- 33 Japan rewrites the war**
Daniel Nassim
- 34 God and the Big Bang**
John Gibson and Manjit Singh
- 37 Toby Banks**
- 38 Living: The law and your life;**
Francis Bacon
- 41 Frank Cottrell-Boyce on TV**
- 43 The Marxist Review of Books**



In this month's *Living Marxism*...

The real dependency culture

While the American authorities try to blame the Los Angeles riots on a criminal black 'underclass', the British establishment seeks to pin responsibility for social problems over here on Britain's own 'underclass' of shiftless urban poor. The new transatlantic consensus is that over-generous government handouts to the needy have created a 'dependency culture' which breeds sloth and crime.

In this month's *Living Marxism*, we expose the real dependency culture in British society: the way in which the state props up the profits of big business, and the wealthy are subsidised by the financial system. From Canary Wharf to Buckingham Palace, we show how the top people in this 'free market' society survive only through the systematic use of backhanders, sweeteners and state handouts.

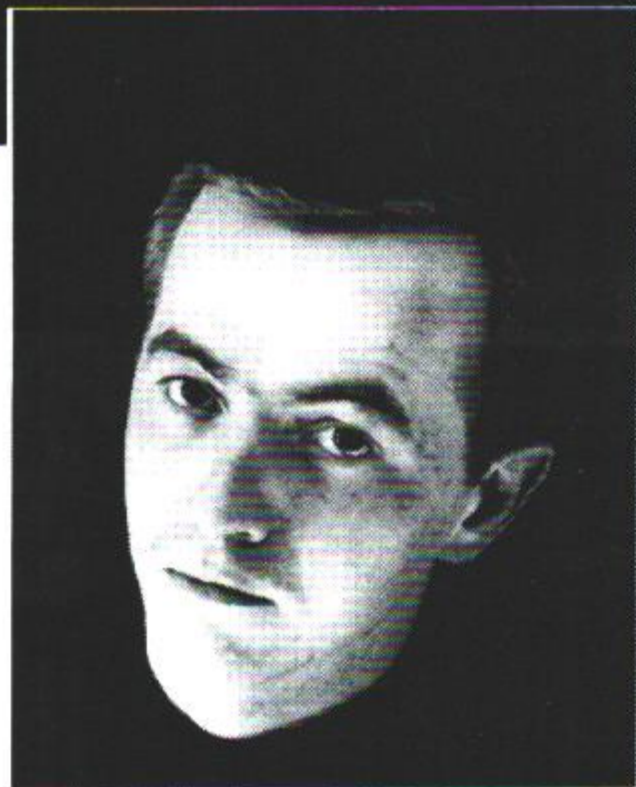
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mick hume

A few home truths

The post-election debate on the British left has been riddled with confusion and self-delusion. If we are to work out how to deal with the problems of the fourth Tory term, there are a few things we need to clear up.

A first confusion in the debate is the idea that the Labour Party lost because voters were too greedy to support its social policies, and voted for Tory tax cuts out of selfishness. One left-wing Labour MP caught the spirit of the emerging consensus by calling for Labour to develop an alternative to the Tories 'especially on the greed factor'.

What do they mean by 'greed'? It conjures up images of satiated fat cats who still want more for the sake of it. No doubt that is a true enough picture of some top Tory supporters. But these few should not be confused with the millions of working class people who voted Conservative again on 9 April.

The majority of those Tory voters adjudged to be greedy are far from satiated. They are economically insecure people, worried about their jobs, mortgages and other debts. They want a better, more prosperous future for themselves and their families. And although many are bitter about the slump, they decided that the Tories were a better bet than Labour to create a more stable economic environment.

Labour now dismisses the decision to vote Tory as a symptom of greed. But

whatever we might think of the decision itself, it was usually informed by an entirely legitimate aspiration—the ambition of working class people to raise their living standards. That is the same aspiration which, in a different context, has recently prompted German workers to join big strikes for higher pay. Like British trade unionists fighting for decent wages in the past, those strikers have been lambasted by the right-wing government, employers and media—for being 'greedy'.

The left's arguments about 'the greed factor' distract attention from the important point. The fact is that people did not want what Labour was offering. The problem begins with Labour Party policy, not with the selfish attitudes of the public.

And what was it that Labour was offering? Here we come to another post-electoral confusion. The notion that people voted Tory out of selfishness suggests that Labour's principle of 'collectivism' was rejected in favour of Tory individualism. From this, many have concluded that the left needs to move further to the centre to fit in with the conservative, individualistic mood of the times.

But Labour did not offer voters an alternative to individualism. Its manifesto had nothing to do with truly collective politics, no mention of people organising together to solve the problems that confront us all. Instead, Labour tried to compete with the Tories in appealing to the electorate as individuals. This was why its spokesmen got bogged down

in the endless argument about how personal taxation policy would affect each man, woman and family.

The Tory promise of lower taxes made a direct appeal to the hard-up individual's wallet. In response, the Labour Party insisted that most families would be better off under its budget. It also asked those same individuals to be charitable, and to make some small personal sacrifice to fund services for the needy.

To many people it must have seemed that they were being asked to choose between their own individual well-being and that of somebody else. The Tories were always likely to win such a contest—especially in this insecure economic climate. A lot of people would opt for the promise of a few more pounds in their pockets, rather than the prospect of paying more to finance the sort of lousy state services which they have come to detest.

Those who want to create an effective opposition movement today have got to learn the lessons of these election debates.

There is clearly no point trying to compete with the Tories in appealing to naked individual self-interest. But we also need to get right away from Labour's idea of charitable socialism, which gives the impression that left-wing politics is about social workers and do-gooders looking after the weak.

This was the patronising philosophy summed up by Glenda Jackson after her election as a Labour MP, when she

declared that she was going to Westminster to care for the poor and needy. That sort of sanctimonious talk might go down well with the chattering classes of Jackson's Hampstead and Highgate constituency, who can afford to feel charitable. But it has little appeal to those aspiring to improve their own lot.

The alternative we need to develop is one which can relate to people's aspirations for a better life—the very same sentiments which the left now condemns as 'greed'. Far from being a problem, that basic aspiration for self-improvement is the key to changing the way society is run. What is required is to channel this ambition in an anti-capitalist direction, by demonstrating the inability of a system based upon private profit to fulfil its promise of a decent life for the vast majority.

So where will the opposition to the Tories come from? That is the other great confusion clouding the post-election debate. Many commentators from the old left have adopted a statistical approach to the issue. Starting from the fact that the Conservatives secured only 42 per cent of the vote, they have noticed that most people did not vote for John Major. They therefore conclude that there exists an 'anti-Tory majority' in British society, just waiting to take over. Prominent left pundits agree with Paddy Ashdown that Labour and the Liberal Democrats should co-operate in bringing that majority together.

The trouble with statistics, however, is that they can prove anything. For example, the government could plausibly argue that, since the Labour Party secured just 35 per cent of the vote, there is a much stronger 'anti-Labour majority' than anti-Tory.

Those employing the statistical approach are trying to discover a ready-made mass opposition movement, a majority that is already there to be mobilised. What matters, however, is politics rather than statistics. The important question is not 'is there an anti-Tory majority on paper?', but 'what does the Labour-Lib Dem "majority" stand for in society?'

Judging by the two parties' election programmes, the answer is that it stands for much the same as the Major govern-

ment. On all of the big issues today, there is less difference between the three parties than ever before. In which case, why should one combination be any better than another?

The Liberal Democrats express this problem acutely. On an issue like education, they may favour slightly more public spending than the Labour Party. Yet they also pride themselves on being more committed to free enterprise than the Tories. It is hard to see what would be gained by collaborating with such a staunchly pro-capitalist party in order to outmanoeuvre the Conservatives. In other words, even if the paper anti-Tory majority

one, like the British establishment. It is open to absolutely anybody who wants to revolutionise the way the world is run. In practice, however, we know that will mean the self-selecting minority of people who are prepared to embrace politics which the majority is not yet ready for.

But how can we galvanise that minority in conditions where many on the left are so downcast after Labour's defeat? And how can such a minority start to make a worthwhile political impact? The secret lies in the sphere of ideas.

The election campaign was the perfect illustration of how important ideas are in politics. The major parties had plenty of

Only a small minority is prepared to support the project of changing society

could be magically made into a political reality, it would bring no benefits to the majority of people.

In the fourth Tory term, the politics of effective opposition cannot be based on mobilising what is already there; they will have to be based upon what we can create from scratch. The first step is to forget about statistic-juggling, and accept that there is no real majority for any political alternative today. Let's also accept that trying to find a short-cut to such a majority, by peddling the bland politics of the lowest common denominator, is worse than useless. After all, that was how the opposition parties got themselves into this mess in the first place.

The cold fact is that only a small minority is prepared to give active support to the project of changing society. Which is why a magazine like *Living Marxism* is not written for everybody; it is designed to identify that minority.

If our opponents think this elitist, so be it. Our minority is not a deliberately exclusive

money and huge publicity machines. But since none of them had a single inspiring idea or vision to put across, none of them could galvanise a dynamic base of support.

By contrast, ideas are all that *Living Marxism* has. The magazine's aim is to develop a new generation of anti-capitalist ideas which, by inspiring a minority, can make a disproportionate impact against the colourless background of contemporary politics.

If you want to play a part in developing those ideas, there are several opportunities ahead. You can come to the Prospects for Change weekend of debate in June (see page 32), and the week-long Towards 2000 event in July (see centre pages). And you can join a local *Living Marxism* readers group.

Of course, if you think our aims are unrealistic, there is an alternative; you could stay home and wait for 'the anti-Tory majority' to defeat 'the greed factor' in the 1997 election.

If you would like more information about *Living Marxism* readers groups in your area, write to Penny Robson, *Living Marxism*, BM RCP London WC1N 3XX, or phone (071) 375 1702

Tyson, race and rape

I have just come across a copy of the inaugural US issue of *Living Marxism* (April, 1992). A new socialist journal is to be welcomed at any time, but especially when revolutionary Marxism is being confronted by the strains and attacks such as those of the current historical epoch. Nevertheless I would like to take issue in the strongest possible terms with Emmanuel Oliver's article 'The rape of black America'.

Aside from the tasteless *double entendre* of the title which denigrates the significance of rape, the entire analysis reflects the atavistic political discourse of a reactionary age. To imply that Mike Tyson's rape indictments, trial and conviction were merely instances of the racism of a white society trying to bring down a black hero is patently false. Tyson has had a long history of brutalising women, and has finally paid the price for his act. To shift the focus of the case to the oppression of African-Americans is disingenuous at best. At worst it typifies the sexist stereotype that rape victims deserve what they get.

It is politically indefensible to uphold the legitimate claims of one oppressed group at the expense of denigrating another group's equally legitimate grievances and aspirations. The question of women's rights is one that cannot be dismissed cavalierly and contemptuously. No woman must ever be told that violence and brutality committed by men should be condoned because to oppose such acts might offend some fragile male egos or lose some men to the political cause. There is no place in revolutionary politics for wishful thinking, much less for one-sided, narrow-minded, stereotypical, prejudiced and dogmatic views.

Ronald Kieve Los Angeles, USA.

Scottish nationalism: no model

How wrong you are, Francis Huddy, when you suggest that 'Scottish nationalism should become a model' (letters, May). There is absolutely nothing progressive about Scottish nationalism. It is nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction to the failure of traditional party politics.

It is absurd to try to compare Scottish nationalism with the struggle for Irish freedom. The former can afford to be 'benign' because it represents no threat to the established order.

You are right to suggest that the fight for Irish self-determination is much more violent. This in itself is an indication of how different the two struggles are. The denial of democratic rights to the Irish was carried out in a brutal way and continues to operate through violent measures. The response from the Irish is, therefore,

necessarily violent and requires our support.

There are no armed troops patrolling the streets of Edinburgh and Glasgow. There has never been in Scotland internment without trial, sham Diplock courts, killings of peaceful civil rights marchers. The Irish struggle challenges the very authority of the British state—Scottish nationalism simply offers an alternative form of managing that state. In this sense alone, the Irish struggle represents an element of real progress that is clearly absent from the narrow focus of Scottish nationalism.

Genevieve West London

Deconstruct the Union?

James Heartfield's misrepresentation of deconstruction belonged to the hurried journalism of the tabloids, not to a putatively theoretical journal like *Living Marxism* ('The Heidegger Affair', April). The sooner Marxists begin to engage seriously with deconstruction rather than rubbishing it the better.

Derrida has said of Marxism that 'there is not one Marxism...But I would reaffirm that there is some possible articulation between an open Marxism and what I am interested in'. Derrida has recently been denied an honorary degree at Cambridge due to the intervention of conservative dons. Is *Living Marxism* to join the ranks of the true blue guardians of English intellectual culture?

Engels maintained that if members of a conquering nation called upon the nation they had conquered and continued to hold down to forget their specific nationality and position, to 'sink national differences', that was not internationalism. Rather it was attempting to perpetuate the dominion of the conqueror under the cloak of internationalism. There is living Marxism for you.

Anything which threatens the integrity of the British state is good for internationalism. Three nations—well, two and a bit—are dictated to by England in an exploitative arrangement which benefits no-one but the British ruling class. Marx was an anti-Unionist, and he saw the advantages to be gained from putting the boot into John Bull.

Dr Willy Maley English Studies, University of Strathclyde

Rights and wrongs

You attack electoral reform and a bill of rights because 'they identify the problem too narrowly in the political sphere, where its roots are to be found in the structure of capitalist society itself'. ('Fear of the masses', April). Yet, as usual when you decide to attack us 'liberal critics of

parliamentary democracy', you fail to back up your assertion with any proof whatsoever.

Is it not about time that you realised the only reason why the government has been able to push through the poll tax, to crush individual rights, and ignore the wishes of the Scottish people for self-government (whether you like it or not, that's what they want) is firstly, because it does not need the support of the majority of the people, and secondly, because the Westminster parliament is omniscient and omnipotent? Far from rejecting a desire to enshrine the rights of every member of this country into a written bill of rights, I support it. Of course, constitutional reform is not going to come from advertisements in newspapers, it is going to come from winning the battle of ideas among the British electorate. It's a challenge for everyone.

David Jackson Glasgow University Liberal Democrats

While I may agree in part with your assertion that 'history offers examples of constitutions imposed by dictators from above or enforced by revolutions from below' ('Fear of the masses', April), there is a country where a constitution was 'imposed' by neither dictators nor by the masses: Spain in 1978.

The point is that a written constitution changes nothing, but it does provide a clear example of the discrepancies between what a worker apparently has a 'right' to and what that worker actually gets.

For example, Article 18 gives a right to privacy at home. Yet the controversial, recently introduced '*Ley Corcuera*', named after the Spanish minister of the interior Jose Luis Corcuera, gives the police a right to enter your home if no satisfactory identification can be produced on demand while in a public place. The most banal aspect of the Spanish constitution is Article 35 which gives one a right to a well-paid job—with unemployment at 16 per cent.

Gareth King London

What causes Aids?

By swallowing establishment propaganda that HIV = Aids = death, *Living Marxism* helps reinforce scare campaigns aimed at heterosexuals. HIV is only 'an indication of high-risk behaviour' (Professor Peter Duesberg quoted in J Adams, *Aids: The HIV myth*, 1989).

In Africa, Aids is caused by malnutrition/starvation = immune suppression = opportunistic infections = death. In the West, immunosuppressive drugs such as Amyl and Butyl nitrate plus repeated re-infection of immunosuppressive pathogens (ie, syphilis, hepatitis,

cytomegalovirus, etc) = overprescription of immunosuppressive antibiotics = Aids = death.

By believing HIV = Aids = death (medically untrue) *Living Marxism* hands the government a powerful weapon in its moral campaign. The contrary argument quoted above kills any moral campaign at birth. We should be arguing that as it causes third world poverty, gay oppression and the alienation which causes drug addiction, that capitalism is the primary cause of Aids.

Lee Osborn Newcastle

Social insecurity

The 'Wages of fear' and 'Job insecurity for life' articles (*Living Marxism*, May) touch on the contradiction that although the work environment is more restrictive, there is no reaction. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, because people want to hang on to any sliver of employment they've got, they are willing to do whatever it takes to keep it. Secondly, my experience of being forced to compete with a fellow working colleague in a publishing house made me hate my competitor even more than the boss who calmly told us that we had to resolve who would keep the one job between ourselves. Eventually, the colleague in question lied about the work I had achieved and she got the job (who needs enemies when you work with people like that?).

A political response won't come about at work because of the isolated way we all work and are set against each other. I think that political change will come from people agreeing on certain issues like anti-racism or anti-sexism generally, rather than focusing attention on to a particular office and its conditions of employment which are too restrictive for political activity.

Tracy Webb South London

Breast-feeding debate

The very fact that E Watkins couldn't contain herself on the classless nature of breast-feeding speaks for itself (letters, May). However, there were several serious points

raised in the original article ('The breast-feeding fraud', April) bypassed by Watkins in her rush to proselytize working-class women.

The description 'time-consuming and boring' can indeed be applied to many aspects of childcare. The point is that at least someone else can share these tasks, whereas breast-feeding ties you to the baby or the breast pump round the clock. In fact 'sturdy nipples and confidence in your ability to produce milk' have little to do with it in my experience, neither has money. It costs a fiver a week to feed a baby on formula milk, and I get free milk tokens from the DSS to cover this anyway.

The substance of the article was that intelligence cannot be measured physiologically, and that suggesting breast-fed babies turn out more intelligent is tantamount to saying that the middle-classes are cleverer than the rest of us. This holds because it is mostly middle-class women who not only choose to breast-feed but also feel they have to make a great song and dance about it to boot.

Sharon Rice Tottenham

The K-Klass struggle

To describe rave music as 'everyone wired on E, jogging to the same record for 10 hours at a stretch' as Jim Roberts did (letters, April) is crude to say the least. If Mr Roberts can find me another type of music that exudes a hyper-energetic spirit of defiance, that incites the fastest, hottest and sexiest dancing, and that inspires technological experimentation (albeit limited) in the kingdom of sound and light, then I'll eat my old sun-hat.

Undoubtedly the music is also very much a product of these pessimistic times, resulting in lyrics that celebrate the irrational and mystical (eg, Oceanic: 'Take Me into Insanity', K-Klass: 'Rhythm Is a Mystery') or just the dangerously naive (eg, Rozalla: 'You've Gotta Have Faith in the Power of Love'). Consequently the music fails to single out the working class as the agent for change in a society out of control.

SL2, perhaps futilely, demanded 'DJs Take Control', but this demand is possibly not as audacious as Mr Roberts', viz that musicians

should strive to emulate guitar virtuosos Rose and Holdsworth, the better of whom Mr Roberts describes as having a 'manner reminiscent of Hendrix himself'. Isn't that the 'Hendrix himself' who died over 20 years ago? In any case, since when has it been our task to tell musicians what to produce? Let's face it, throbbing 20K bass and strobe-light are moving thousands of working class groovers now, so come on, Mr Roberts, take a trip to the dance platform and *get stompin'*.

Ciaran Nottingham

'Humane' medical research

I am cancelling my subscription for *Living Marxism* as a protest against the way your publication condones vivisection.

I wonder how well Ann Bradley researched her article ('Origins of a speciesist', May). Sadly, thousands become ill each year in the UK alone as a result of prescribed drugs and their side effects, drugs which were successful in curing rats and beagles but, as Ann Bradley reminds us quite frequently in her articles, we are very different from animals.

I support medical research—I want people to be cured and I value people more highly than animals. We now have human tissue culture and a vast range of technology at our disposal—vivisection is outmoded, expensive and often inaccurate. A growing number of doctors and scientists are reaching this conclusion. There are a number of charities which raise money to fund humane medical research projects. One of these, the D'Hadwen Trust run by Dr Gill Langley would happily give more information to Ann Bradley about their work.

Mary Montgomery Bristol

Space cadets

Having read *Militant* and *Socialist Worker* during the election campaign, I believe readers of *Living Marxism* should be thankful that any waste of space stays strictly between articles.

Nye Thwashnormosc Leeds

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

Racism!

the issue of our times

Linda Ryan puts the Los Angeles riots in perspective

The explosion of frustration and anger in Los Angeles at the end of April should have come as no surprise to readers of *Living Marxism*. From its inception, this magazine has argued that racism is the key issue of our times.

The dynamic of what *Living Marxism* has called 'the silent race war' is now evident not only in America, but throughout the capitalist world. It is silent because there is little discussion of racism in public, and yet it is an issue that is constantly used by the right to consolidate support for its policies.

Racism has relentlessly brutalised the black population of urban America. The division between black and white is now so intense as to make anything more than the most routine communication impossible. The geographical separation of the races in cities like LA is of South African proportions. And although there now exists a conservative black middle class, the vast majority of blacks constitute the poorest of America's poor.

One surprise

The race issue pervades all aspects of life in the USA. It is not possible to move about in New York, Chicago, Detroit or Los Angeles without acquiring a heightened sense of race. The only thing that is really surprising about the outburst of violence in Los Angeles is that such things happen relatively rarely. The events there have predictably provided an opportunity for the media to confuse matters further.

In America and abroad, politicians and the media initially had some difficulty working out an appropriate response to the outburst in LA. The failure of the courts to convict four policemen filmed beating up a black man, Rodney King, was an embarrassment to the apologists for the system. The reputation of the Los Angeles police for vicious racism made it difficult at first for the authorities to condemn the outpouring

of anger which greeted the decision to let off the four policemen. Consequently, during the early stages of the unrest, official condemnations of the rioters were linked to criticisms of the jury's verdict and of the Los Angeles police department.

After two days of violence the emphasis had changed. The media were still referring to the lack of justice in King's case and the appalling record of the local police. However these criticisms had become separated from the discussion of the riots. There was a gradual severing of the relationship between the police violence and the outcome of the trial on the one hand, and the violence on the streets on the other.

Criminal lust

By now, more and more politicians and pundits were arguing that the rioters were opportunist thieves, gangsters or delinquents driven by criminal lust, rather than people reacting to injustice and police brutality. In other words, they were suggesting that racism had little to do with the rioting.

The separation of the violence from its immediate context helped to relocate the problem from that of racial oppression to that of the alleged 'culture of criminality' among America's inner-city blacks. This adjustment in the presentation of the problem was made possible by the way in which the issue of racism has been recast within American politics.

Numerous lengthy commentaries published during and after the riots illustrate how the issue of racism has been robbed of its meaning. In the abstract, observers are prepared to concede the existence of racism. Individual cases are cited, but always in a way which suggests that racism is not responsible for the inferior social position of blacks in general, or for their anger.

There are two varieties of this argument. Sometimes an individual case of racism is discussed, for example

that of Rodney King, in order to underline its exceptional character. Alternatively racism is discussed as a state of mind common among individual white Americans, either in response to the unreasonable attitudes of blacks or because it is natural to possess this sort of outlook. Once racism has been defined as natural in this way, it ceases to be a political problem with a solution. And all the commentaries are quick to insist that, no matter how widespread the problem of racism, it does not explain the black response in LA.

The argument is that, whatever the attitudes of individual whites, blacks no longer suffer from systematic discrimination. The authorities and experts admit that racial discrimination did exist in the past—but no longer. As evidence, they point to the various government programmes designed to eradicate poverty and to the system of quotas implemented under different affirmative action initiatives.

The more right-wing commentators go further and argue that it is whites who experience discrimination today, since quota systems favour the less qualified black person. There is no space here to discuss the reality of the situation, except to suggest that affirmative action did no favours for black Americans. The hostile reaction to these programmes is fuelled by race hatred. Why else has hostility towards affirmative action for women been far more muted?

Blame blacks

Denying the reality of racial discrimination necessarily leads to the conclusion that black people are to blame for their plight. According to the emerging consensus, blacks are either not good enough or too lazy to make it in America. The media points to the entrepreneurial zeal and work ethic of Asian immigrants, such as the Korean shopkeepers in the Los Angeles ghetto. In true American fashion, these immigrants start at the bottom of the



What racism? The media broadcast the message that the riots were about criminality

ladder but quickly work their way up. By contrast, commentators suggest, black teenagers are too busy having babies or smoking crack to emulate the work ethic of other communities.

Guiltless whites

Having disposed of the idea that black poverty has social causes, the argument turns back to the whites. Most commentaries emphasise that white people in America *no longer* feel guilty about racism. The implication is that they felt guilty about it in the sixties but have now had their senses restored. Of course, in reality most white Americans did not suffer from an overdose of guilt in the sixties either. The argument about the lack of guilt is really a coded exhortation to white people not to feel responsible for the position of blacks in society. It represents advice to white America to be indifferent to the plight of black communities.

The attempt to reassure whites about their lack of guilt is reinforced by the sinister suggestion that the American authorities have done all they can to help blacks in the past, but to no avail. All the poverty programmes and all the money proved to be useless in the face of black attitudes. Indeed, according

to this interpretation, the attempt to reform urban America only made the situation worse, by making black communities even more dependent on state handouts.

Once racial discrimination has been defined out of existence, the view that black people are the problem becomes legitimised. The call for whites not to feel guilty helps to endow racial thinking with respectability. In fact this is a flexible argument, which can accommodate denunciations of the 'extreme', 'exceptional' cases of racism such as the verdict in the King case, while attacking the entire black community for its intrinsic criminality.

Race and state

The new politics of race is strengthened by the fact that it can relate to reality, by acknowledging the prevalence of racist attitudes among white Americans. It absolves the American state system of any responsibility for this problem, and accepts racial discrimination as having no contemporary relevance. Consequently, if anybody is to be blamed for the crisis it must be those who refuse to make the most of the available opportunities—that is America's inner-city blacks.

This new version of racist politics links the attacks on blacks to the denunciation of state intervention. Welfare is said to encourage sloth and punish those who work hard. This will be a familiar message to our British readers—except that in the case of the USA the argument immediately acquires racial overtones.

Only the start

The intellectual response of the authorities and the media to the Los Angeles riots suggests that there is more oppression to come. The old liberal inhibitions still prevail—but increasingly the politics of racial thinking enter into the public domain.

It might still be unacceptable for American politicians to use the language of the Ku Klux Klan, but people now feel far less inhibited about blaming the criminality of the black community for the problems of the ghetto, and dismissing any idea that blacks are the victims of American society. This trend is not surprising, since racism is one of the most powerful ways of disaggregating the working class and undermining any opposition to capitalism. The silent race war is set to continue.

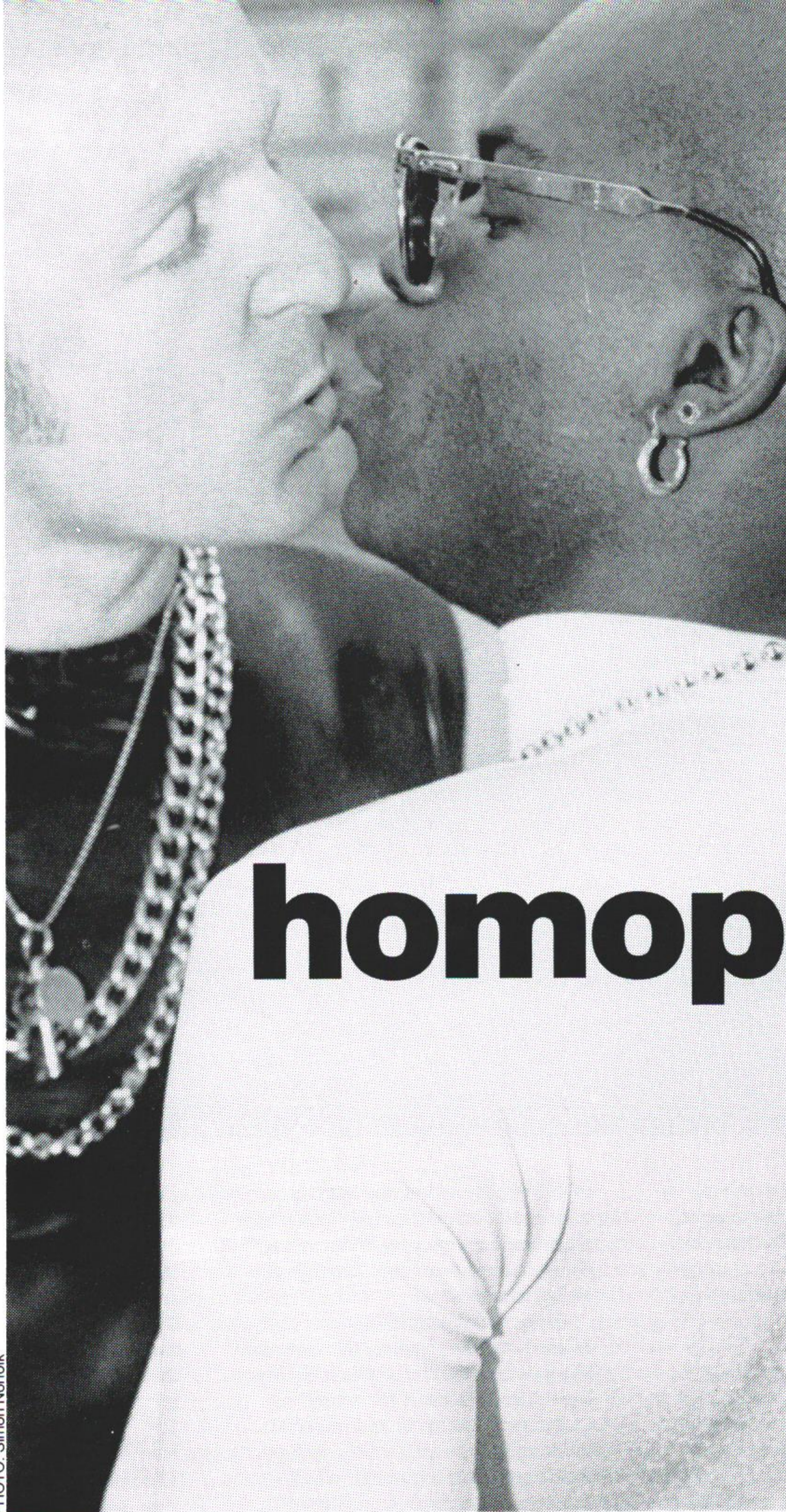


PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

The myth of homophobia

Peter Ray examines why there is such hostility to homosexuals

Had enough of homophobia? According to the gay press every reactionary from *Sun* columnist Garry Bushell to the Pope seems to be suffering from it. Recently the straight press too has caught on to the epidemic. The lesbian and gay Christian movement's discovery that the Archbishop of Canterbury had a bad case was widely reported. Even the *Sunday Times* permitted one of its reporters to suggest that 'homophobic attitudes' may contribute to gay men having to cruise in public parks.

Nobody has done more to uncover cases of homophobia in high places than the gay pressure group OutRage. One of the group's four stated aims

is to 'promote public awareness and debate about homophobic discrimination'. OutRage recently organised publicity stunts pointing to homophobia in the military and the police, and it has been on hand to condemn as homophobic everything from the Jason 'straight as fuck' Donovan libel trial to the Operation Spanner judicial crackdown on homosexual sado-masochism.

There can be no doubt that public hostility and discrimination against homosexuals has reached epidemic proportions. Hundreds of gay men are arrested every year for 'crimes' involving consenting sexual acts, 'crimes' for which consenting heterosexuals could not be punished. Homosexuals are constantly attacked by the press and politicians for living a lifestyle that is 'promiscuous', 'irresponsible' or just plain 'wicked'. Harassment, ridicule and violence are an everyday hazard for many lesbians and gay men.

Fact of life

Anti-homosexual bigotry is a fact. However, the idea that this is the result of something called homophobia is a myth.

Although liberal journalists and political activists use the term freely, they rarely spell out exactly what homophobia is supposed to mean. The word was coined by American psychologist George Weinberg in his 1973 book *Society and the Healthy*

Homosexual. Weinberg defined homophobia as a 'dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals' which manifested itself as a panic reaction in both heterosexuals and closeted gays.

It is easy to see why the idea of homophobia has caught on. To anyone who has been on the receiving end of anti-gay abuse or violence, the perpetrator often seems to be motivated by an irrational and morbid fear of gay sexuality, with more than a hint of the panic reaction associated with more conventional phobias.

Better still, calling it homophobia makes ironical use of the same kind of quasi-medical terminology that has been mobilised against homosexuals. For most of this century discussion about homosexuality has been dominated by the idea that it is a mental illness, and debate has raged as to whether it is acquired or innate. In this patronising view the homosexual was to be pitied rather than condemned, and 'cured' if at all possible.

Turning tables

The 'medicalisation' of homosexuality means that for a long time homosexuals have been stigmatised as (and often believed themselves to be) sick, inadequate and self-destructive individuals. The discovery of homophobia appears to turn the tables: where once it was the lesbian or the gay man who was diseased, now it is the 'homophobe'; where once psychiatrists assembled character traits to come up with the 'homosexual type', now they can be gathered to form the 'homophobic type'. The homosexual can triumphantly tell the bigot—'You are screwed up because you think I am!'.
 If homophobia were simply used as an ironic description of the queer-basher's personality it would be harmless enough. But homophobia is being used indiscriminately to describe any manifestation of hostility to homosexuals, and not just those associated with *individual* politicians, judges or pop stars either.

Eurohomophobia

The *Guardian* recently reported Moscow gay activist Roman Kalinin saying that 'Russian society is extremely homophobic'. In Britain, *Gay Times* columnist Simon Watney has characterised both Europe and America as homophobic societies. What can this mean? That everyone in Europe and the US suffers from this same irrational dread?

Others argue that there are such things as 'homophobic laws'. So another of the four aims of OutRage is to 'expose and challenge state homophobia'. The idea here seems

to be that homophobia in society is sustained and promoted by the repressed and bigoted attitude of those in authority.

Some claim that the whole of society is homophobic, while some say it is a problem of the elite. Either way, the inescapable conclusion is that there must be something systematic at work in our society reproducing such fear and loathing on a large scale. But if this is the case, why describe the problem in medical terms, as homophobia, as if it were a psychiatric problem of individuals?

Not irrational

Dread of spiders or enclosed spaces is discussed as arachnophobia or claustrophobia precisely because there is no systematic social cause for these fears. There is no *reason* to fear spiders or enclosed spaces in themselves, most people don't. But hostility towards homosexuality is different. For some sections of society it is not irrational; in fact it is a positive necessity.

The capitalist authorities have every reason to be hostile to the shameless pursuit of homosexual desire. The establishment values the nuclear family as a key bulwark of the social order, defining the social roles of men and women, disciplining youth, and providing domestic care and attention (on the cheap). The family is promoted by its supporters as the natural (and therefore unchanging) order of adult human relations. The family is natural because it is based on the natural instinct to procreate. Healthy sexual desires are therefore heterosexual, and preferably monogamous.

Family norms

Unfortunately for the establishment, modern urban society makes it possible for some men and women to escape the requirement to live in a family, and to organise their personal lives around the pleasure that their sexual desires bring them, regardless of their capacity to procreate. The fact that many try to do this has been both a challenge to the idea that the family is natural, and an opportunity for the establishment to develop new strategies for promoting the family as the norm.

The castigating of homosexuals as diseased or perverted, or at the very least deviant, confirms family life as the natural, healthy and normal lifestyle. Someone who is sufficiently sick, evil or irresponsible as to indulge their homosexuality is clearly not to be treated as if they were normal, and since the 1880s homosexual behaviour has been subject to severe legal penalties. For a long time the social stigma and threat of a prison sentence proved to be an effective

deterrent to any public challenge to the superiority of the authorities' preferred domestic arrangements.

The Tories made this logic explicit in the infamous Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which states that schools should not be allowed to teach 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. In other words, lesbian and gay lifestyles are not an acceptable alternative to the nuclear family.

No doubt the Tory frontbench is afflicted by all sorts of sexual hang-ups, and Garry Bushell does seem to have a personal axe to grind against gays. But that is not why the authorities maintain legal discrimination against homosexuals, not why the media rages against lesbians and gay men. The defence of the family as a social institution requires the criminalisation of sex that is not 'natural', not responsible, not compatible with family life. The many laws which discriminate against homosexuals, and the whole political and moral climate of prejudice, stem from this reality.

Morbid symptoms

In these circumstances it is absurd to diagnose some psychiatric disorder when confronted by bigotry. When somebody reacts with panic, scorn or violence to finding themselves 'in close quarters with homosexuals' they are acting as any responsible citizen might when confronted with a sub-class of person whom the authorities regard as a threat to public health or welfare. This behaviour is irrational only to the extent that society is irrational, sick only because it is a morbid symptom of a decaying social order.

It is a telling irony that Weinberg should have published his ideas about the new disease called homophobia in 1973, the same year that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of illnesses. The really destructive aspect of explaining away the systematic oppression of lesbians and gay men as homophobia is that it depoliticises the problem: which is precisely what the 'medicalisation' of homosexuality achieved prior to the 1970s. In both cases a problem of oppression rooted in the backward structures of a divisive and exploitative society is reduced to a problem of individuals' irrational fears and desires. And since such fears are not susceptible to a political solution, those who believe in homophobia must conclude that you cannot get rid of it.

Of course, for many homophobia is just a word, and who cares what word people use to describe anti-gay prejudice? But as a concept homophobia cannot explain what causes the oppression of homosexuals, and can only confuse those who want to end it.

**There is no such
thing
as**

a free

The Conservatives have spent years attacking the 'dependency culture' allegedly created by state intervention and welfare systems, and broadcasting the virtues of free enterprise. Helen Simons agrees that there is a dependency culture in British society—but one that acts to prop up capitalists and the free market with sweeteners, backhanders and subsidies

PHOTO: Michael Kramer



market

When Margaret Thatcher published her post-election criticisms of the government in the American magazine *Newsweek*, she emphasised the danger that, after all her hard work in promoting free enterprise, the dreaded scourge of state intervention was about to make a comeback under John Major.

Major was quick to reply. Addressing the faithful at the Institute of Directors, he declared that, by electing him, the British electorate had in fact reaffirmed support for the Thatcherite free market as against state interference:

'They want a Britain which recognises indisputably at last that free enterprise—not state intervention and socialism—is the route to national health and personal prosperity. That was the golden discovery of the eighties...it was the secret for which generations had looked in vain. Now

in the 1990s, I promise you we will go on with the policies that have been so successful.'

Support for the free market and opposition to state intervention is a key couplet of modern Conservative philosophy that Major is reluctant to abandon. He understands that one of the Tories' true 'golden discoveries of the eighties' was that they could make the market economy look dynamic by contrasting it to their vision of blight and inefficiency under a state-sponsored 'dependency culture'.

Major has softened the tone somewhat, avoiding the Thatcherite language used to attack the 'nanny state' and benefit scroungers, but the message remains the same. Implicit in the Tory election campaign's emphasis on cutting taxes was the idea that the free market is good and breeds excellence, while state intervention is bad and breeds mediocrity and dependence.

The Tories have repeated this message so often over the past 13 years that some believe they have made a breakthrough in rolling back the frontiers of the state. For example, Treasury statements often boast of the Tory success in reining back public expenditure from nearly 50 per cent of GDP at the start of the eighties to just over 40 per cent at the end of the decade. Others point to the abolition of the GLC, the privatisation schemes or the sale of council houses to illustrate the point.

The Tory Party's campaign against state intervention has certainly paid electoral dividends. Many people are rightly sick and tired of the lousy services provided by central and local government. They have proved open to Tory arguments about the evils of state dependence and the relative virtues of private initiative.

However, the fact that there is now a broad swathe of opinion opposed to state intervention does not mean that



free enterprise is really succeeding in the nineties. Indeed, despite all the Tory boasts, the reality is that slump-ridden British capitalism is now even more dependent on state support than ever.

There is a 'dependency culture' in Britain that breeds parasites and losers. But it has nothing to do with the millions forced to subsist on miserly

The slump has exposed the Olympia and York empire as a tower built on sand, credit and PR hype

dole payments. If the Tories genuinely want to track down the scroungers who leech off British society, they need look no further than their own friends in the boardrooms of the City, commerce and industry. The real dependency culture built into British capitalism is the system through which the government and its allies prop up big business, to compensate for the failures of the free market.

In order to explore this dependency culture, we need only take a look at one of the free market miracles of the eighties—the Canary Wharf development in London's Docklands. Before breaking all records for massive debt default, the Olympia and York property development at Canary Wharf was portrayed as one of the most potent symbols of Thatcherite economics.

For the Tories, the spectacular Canary Wharf Tower stood for all that was superior about free market economics. This was the private sector leading the way in urban renewal, where the state had failed. The Olympia and York chiefs, the Reichmanns, were self-made millionaires. The buildings all shot up in record time. In contrast to the shoddy designs put up by municipal authorities, the tower and its surrounds promised to be sparkling and opulent. At last private money and the free market had come together to create an urban paradise. With such impeccable

credentials it was little wonder that the first foundation stone was laid by Margaret Thatcher to launch her campaign for the 1987 general election.

However, the truth about Canary Wharf is a far cry from the Tory fairy tale. Instead of embodying the principles of free market economics and the entrepreneurial spirit, the development has from the outset been built on state subsidies and backhanders.

LDDC scam

The property developers were enticed into the docklands by government giveaways. Set up under the watchful eye of Michael Heseltine at the Department of the Environment, the London Dockland Development Corporation was essentially a scam to attract investment into a derelict corner of London with attractive grants and subsidies. From the first, the government had to work overtime to prop up and nurture the scheme.

Grants and incentives were forthcoming at every stage of the project. For example, enterprise grants paid for up to 80 per cent of Olympia and York's land clearance costs. The often costly affair of obtaining planning permission was all but avoided as the government let it through more or less on the nod. A special tax exemption scheme is reported to have reduced O&Y's overheads by a third. To date rates are still being waived on the property. Other inducements included government commitments to build road connections to the City, the West End and the M25, and to share the costs of extending the Jubilee line of the London Underground to the tower in the middle of nowhere.

In fact, if all the government promises to O & Y are totalled, it adds up to an estimated bill of £3.8 billion. That is an impressive sum, especially when compared to the total estimated cost to private investors of £8 billion (figures quoted in the *Independent on Sunday*, 11 August 1991).

40% let

The slump has exposed the Olympia and York empire as a tower built on sand, credit and PR hype. The company has plunged into a record debt crisis. Yet even though these champions of entrepreneurial endeavour have been exposed as dodgy property speculators, the government remains desperate to shore up its Docklands showpiece.

The first signs of trouble for O&Y were evident at the time of last July's launch party for the Canary Wharf tower, when it became clear that only 40 per cent of the available office space had been let. Party attender Michael Heseltine stepped in once more to save the day. Not wanting to see his flagship

sunk before it had even set sail, Heseltine offered to help with the rent by moving his entire department into some of the vacant space.

In March, the Reichmanns declared to the world that they could not repay debts totalling over £11 billion—equivalent to the debt of a medium-sized nation. Yet the Tories, normally so keen to deliver lectures on the importance of thrift and good housekeeping, have continued trying to prop up the bankrupt Canary Wharf project. Shortly after the debt was announced, the government's allies at the Bank of England were on the phone to all of the major banks stitching up a deal to keep the company afloat. There have also been renewed rumours of more civil servants heading off to the Docklands to help with the overheads.

In a way the Canary Wharf development does sum up all that can be said about Tory economics. The entire survival strategy of uncompetitive British capitalism now depends upon a stream of subsidies and other measures of state support. A quick look at what's happening to some of the other eighties' success stories reveals a similar picture.

'Big Bang'

The cut and thrust of the financial markets was presented as the most successful part of Britain's free market economy in the late eighties. The Tory economists claim that, once the City's stiff old constraints on dealers were removed by the 'Big Bang' of 1987, market forces reigned supreme.

However, a more honest picture of the workings of the financial sector is revealed by the various scandals that have hit the headlines in recent years—most notably at Blue Arrow, Guinness, and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI). Far from thriving on the principles of free enterprise, the City operates a dependency culture of its own, surviving through shady deals, backhanders and illegal pay-offs. What is more, this is not just the work of a few unsavoury characters; it appears to have the implicit go ahead from the Bank of England.

At the Blue Arrow fraud trial, for example, it was revealed that the Bank of England had been informed of peculiar goings on in the company's share issue back in 1987. But the Bank decided to take no action. When, in 1988, the Department of Trade and Industry was forced to investigate the mounting rumours that the share issue price had been falsely inflated by Blue Arrow's financial backer County NatWest, the authorities still tried to avoid the scandal, insisting that NatWest investigate itself. As one commentator put it, 'the Bank [of England] held County's hand during the affair hoping the

problem would be quietly managed away' (*Sunday Times*, 15 March 1992).

Similarly at BCCI, the Bank of England was extremely reluctant to rock the boat. In fact, the Bank did everything possible to shield the fraudsters. Despite the fact that the bank lost millions in 1986, and faced a drug indictment charge in 1988, the Bank of England coordinated attempts to bail out BCCI at every juncture. What is more it will be the Treasury that will foot much of the bill for the final pay-off of creditors if BCCI is declared bust.

The fact that the Bank of England would persistently support such a corrupt institution is testimony to how far the authorities will go to bail out the big banks today—not because of any personal loyalty to the crooks at BCCI, but because of fears that the whole shaky financial system might collapse without such support. As Bank of England governor Robin Leigh-Pemberton put it at the time,

evidence of the capitalist dependency culture. Through the privatisation policy, the government has effectively handed over valuable assets to big business at a knockdown price.

All of the share offers have been considerably underpriced. Buyers were, therefore, enticed into the market on the basis that there was a government giveaway with every share, rather than by real market forces. In this way, some of the most profitable corporations in the country—such as British Telecom or the electricity boards—have been sold to the private sector on the cheap.

Although the Tory government sold privatisation as a cornerstone of popular capitalism that would spread share ownership among ordinary people, the vast majority of the shares have ended up in the hands of the major financial institutions. A policy presented as a triumph of the free market and a bonus for the small shareholder has turned out to be a case of the state giving billionaire

could quickly sell off the land to developers and make a huge killing. Such an underhand device may not look like an old-fashioned government grant to an ailing industry, but the end result is just the same.

All of the Tory successes of the past 13 years involve similar stories. Behind every new investment there is a government grant and a tax break, just as every successful British businessman has been propelled along by the invisible hand of the state.

Despite the claims of Thatcher and Major, the dependency culture is alive and well within the ranks of the British establishment. True, state interventions have been dressed up in a new language and packaging since the seventies. But whether it is called enterprise initiative or state handouts to lame ducks, and whether it happens through formal or informal channels, it adds up to pretty much the same thing. The government of the day has subsidised the market system. What is more, in the middle of the worst slump since the war, state support is going to become even more vital to keep British capitalism in business. And, as the Olympia and York crisis suggests, even that will not be enough to keep some of the free enterprise flagships afloat.

Up and up

So what of the claim that the Tories have stemmed the tide of rising state spending? They did appear to reduce the overall levels of state spending in the eighties. They are right to claim that the level of state spending as a percentage of GDP dropped by nearly 10 per cent between 1975 and 1988. However, this is more a quirk of the statistics than a major breakthrough.

Real levels of state spending stayed broadly level throughout the period. All that happened was that national output rose in the eighties, making the same level of state spending a smaller percentage of total national output. As output has fallen during the slump, so the trend of reducing state spending as a percentage of GDP is reversed. For the past two years, state spending has crept up. This is a trend that will be impossible to reverse as more and more companies and institutions look to some form of government assistance to bail them out.

The Tories' claim to have rolled back the frontiers of the state is a myth. A quick calculation of their own figures shows that they now spend roughly the same amount on dole payments to nearly three million unemployed as they hand out to a few businessmen via the Department of Trade and Industry. Even that figure excludes the informal government deals and backhanders which have become such a lifeline for the unfree economy in recent years. ●



'if we closed down a bank every time we had a fraud, we would have rather fewer banks than we have'.

Perhaps the most popular image of the rolling back of the state since the eighties has been the privatisation of public corporations. The selling-off of chunks of public assets seemed to epitomise the enterprise culture. And since the money the government raised through the privatisation deals has been counted as 'negative state expenditure', it has helped to give the impression that state spending is being cut back.

Despite appearances, however, the great state sell-offs have provided more

corporations control over some huge private monopolies.

Some of the sell-offs were only possible because the government went further still, offering secret 'sweeteners' and pay-offs to potential buyers. The best-known example was the sale of the Royal Ordnance works to British Aerospace (BAe). These state-owned munitions factories were sold to BAe in April 1987 for £190m. In the original sale price, the government 'estimated' the land values of some of the factory sites at less than one per cent of their real market value. As a result, the BAe asset strippers

The Lloyd's insurance market in the City of London has long provided easy pickings for Britain's rich. Phil Murphy explains how the system works—and why it is in trouble today

How do the rich stay rich? How do the wealthy in British society remain part of that exclusive club? The 300-year old Lloyd's insurance market has played a big part.

Among the most famous and profitable of the City of London's activities, Lloyd's is renowned for its worldwide business in underwriting insurance risks. Anything from a jumbo jet to a footballer's leg can be insured at Lloyd's. What is less well known is the way this underwriting business has for a long time effectively underwritten the fortunes of Britain's rich and famous.

For capitalists, one of the nice things about the insurance business is that you don't need much capital in the first place. Apart from a plush office, a few telephones and some embossed headed stationery, you only need to be able to convince the people or companies you are providing with an insurance policy that you could pay up in the event of things going wrong. If you pull off this confidence trick then you simply rake in the premiums, and, if you set the premiums high enough, you should make enough to pay out the odd insurance claim. And it's not really that risky a business; if you take on something you think is too big a risk, you can always spread the danger by reinsuring with another company.

Insiders and outsiders

Lloyd's is different from a normal insurance company in that its capital doesn't come from shareholders but from its own members—known as underwriters—and from wealthy outsiders—known as 'names'. Without going into its quaint 'coffee house' customs, the way Lloyd's works is that a client who wants to insure, say, an oil platform, goes to one of Lloyd's authorised broking firms. The broker then finds a Lloyd's underwriter prepared to accept the business for a set premium. The underwriters don't accept risks as individuals but club together in one of about 300 syndicates, to spread the costs. These syndicates are bolstered by bringing in the wealthy outsiders—the names—to join them.

The list of Lloyd's names reads like a who's who of the higher echelons of

British society, accompanied by the sort of celebrities who appear at Tory Party rallies. The names range from politicians to actresses, from sportsmen to the owners of industry, from TV personalities to royalty. It is one way the wealthy look after their own.

Join the club

From time to time someone from a more humble background would be let in to add a touch of sparkle; the message is that anyone can make it (so long as you have got the money and connections). Edward Heath, Tony Jacklin, Prince Michael of Kent, Lord Denham, Dame Shirley Porter, Susan Hampshire, the Duke of Norfolk, Freddie Laker, Lester Piggott, Rocco Forte, the Duke of Marlborough, Henry Cooper and the late Robert Maxwell are among those who made it into this cosy and lucrative club.

The way the rich make their extra money at Lloyd's is about as simple as placing a large bet. The big difference is that you are almost certain to win. And you don't even have to place all of your stake money. Of course to become a name and join this exclusive money-making club, you need to be rich and famous in the first place. You have to be introduced to the Lloyd's Committee by an existing member. You also have to demonstrate a 'show of wealth' of at least £250 000 in realisable assets. And the more wealth you can show, the bigger the policies you can be involved in underwriting and the fatter the premiums you can share.

One-way bet

Most of the time it's like being the sleeping partner in some scam. You don't need to, and aren't expected to, take any interest in the business—that is run by the professionals, the insiders, to whom you pay 'expenses'. You are simply given your cut when the deal is completed.

Being a name at Lloyd's is even more attractive than benefiting from a one-way bet, because you only have to put on about a quarter of your stake. Most of the wealth you 'show' you can hang on to. So while you are using it to make your underwriting profit, it is

simultaneously available for you to invest and make money with elsewhere. And if you use some of your existing stocks and shares as part of your deposit with Lloyd's, the income from them still accrues to you. So even with the deposit, it is more like using a safe-deposit box that pays interest than making a risky investment.

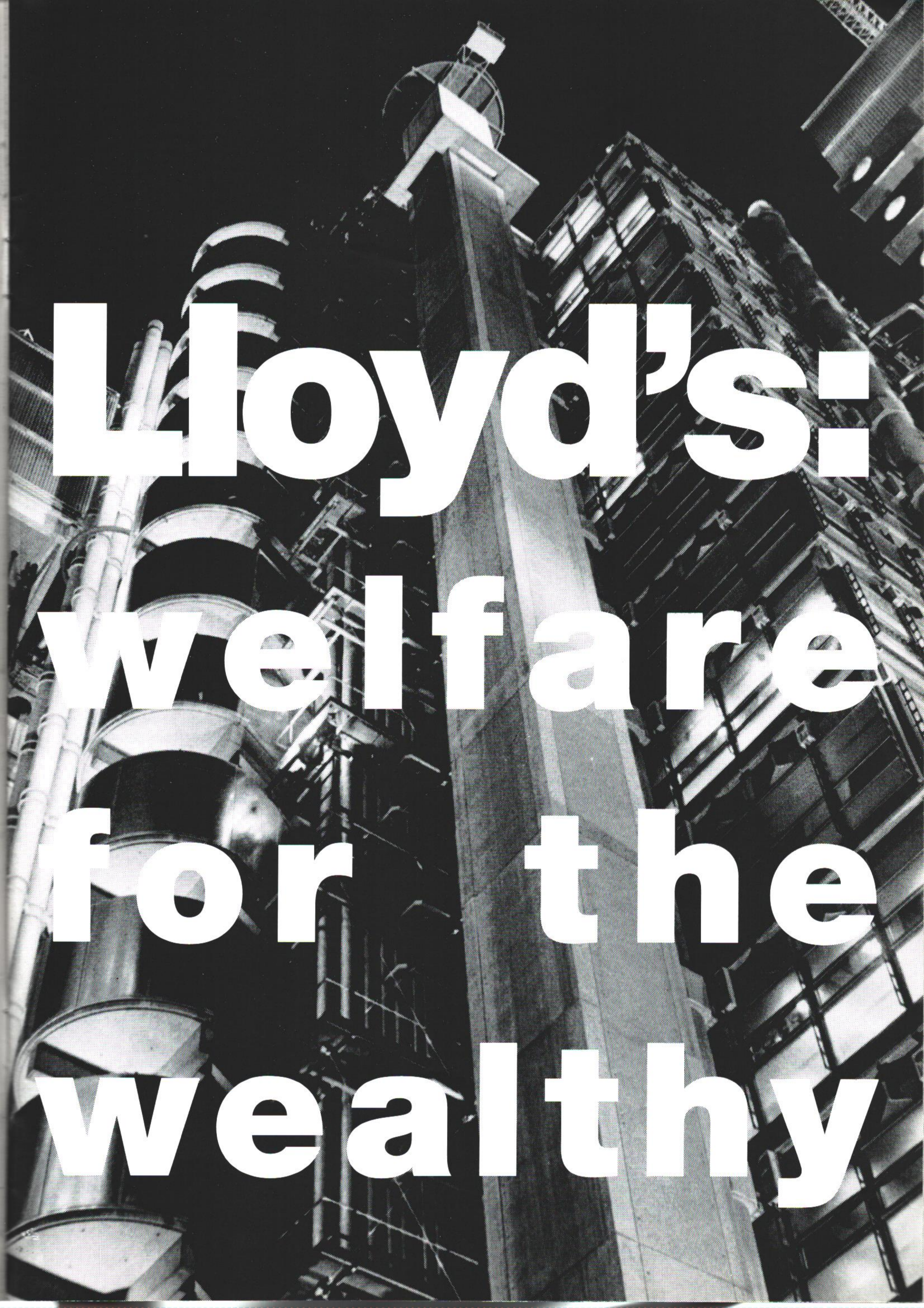
In most years then, everybody has appeared to win. The client is happy by having his risk insured. Lloyd's full-timers, the underwriters, make money by investing the capital at their disposal; they also invest their premium income and make profits when the premiums exceed the insurance claims; they also have tax privileges, in that any losses can be carried forward to offset profits in future years. Other insiders, like the various underwriting and members' agents, also earn juicy fees for their services. And for the names, the cheques from Lloyd's just keep dropping through the letter box. (The only losers are you and me who pay the higher prices charged for goods to cover the suppliers' insurance premiums.)

New names

During the eighties the Lloyd's gravy train seemed to be making more money than ever for those privileged enough to be on board. Like the rest of the City, the famous insurance market suffered a spate of scandals in the eighties. But at the time, the tarnishing of Lloyd's reputation seemed to do little real harm. The government's backing for 'self-regulation' at Lloyd's has ensured that the biggest frauds have been covered up. And the scandals didn't stop more than 15 000 eager new names signing up in the eighties.

Today, however, Lloyd's seems to have hit a dramatic slump. Last year Lloyd's reported its first loss for many years—half a billion pounds on its 1988 dealings (its accounts are always done this way, three years in arrears, supposedly to allow for dealing with late claims). More big losses are expected for 1989, 1990 and possibly 1991, totalling around £5 billion.

The names are upset. Nobody thought they could lose money by joining Lloyd's. Yet, in the event of



**Lloyd's:
welfare
for the
wealthy**



losses by their syndicates, the names officially have unlimited liability. They are expected to sell everything to pay their share, above and beyond what they originally 'showed' when they joined the club in happier times.

Not surprisingly the number of names has started to plummet: more than 10 000 have quit since 1988, down to just over 20 000. But quitting doesn't cancel past losses. Going to court might do, and at least it postpones the day of reckoning. So today more than 1000 names are involved in legal action alleging negligence by their agents or by Lloyd's itself.

The official line from Lloyd's is that you are bound to get runs of bad luck from time to time. They argue that global warming has caused adverse weather conditions and a series of

Lloyd's names are no longer guaranteed to get richer quick

storms and hurricanes since 1987. This combined with a number of major industrial disasters—explosions on the Piper Alpha oil platform in the North Sea in 1988, followed by another at a Philips Petroleum plant in Pasadena in 1989—have resulted in an abnormal series of hefty insurance claims.

The names, say Lloyd's, should stop crying and just accept that you sometimes have to take the rough with the smooth. After all, insurance is all about risk. Things will even themselves out in the future through better fortune and, failing that, higher premiums. (Look at what's happened to your car or house insurance premiums this year to get an idea of which way things are going.)

In fact, the problems now facing Lloyd's go a lot further than a bit of bad luck. They reflect the severity of the wider problems facing British capitalists in the current slump.

In modern times, the provision of financial services has been the one area in which Britain can still seriously claim to be an economic world leader. Insurance, banking, share dealing, accountancy and investment services are just about all that remain for the British establishment to be proud of in an economy which once led the world in everything from steel production to machine tools, from cotton to shipbuilding.

Altogether financial services account for about one fifth of national output. Without their proceeds Britain

would fall even further down the international league table, well behind France and Italy, and be exposed as an economic has-been.

Within the financial sector centred on the City, insurance has long been the biggest earner. Since the Second World War insurance has usually accounted for about half of total City earnings from overseas. And within the insurance sector, Lloyd's has often made more from underwriting overseas business than all the other insurance companies in Britain put together. In 1987, Lloyd's made nearly £2 billion for the British balance of payments.

Tougher and tougher

But even Lloyd's, the last jewel in the crown of British capitalism, is finding the global going tougher and tougher.

Lloyd's did well out of the world economic expansion of the eighties. That 'boom' was really a credit-fuelled binge of speculation which produced mountains of paper financial assets, but far less investment in real up-to-date plant and technology. The financial sector thrived on the back of this phoney boom. Lloyd's not only benefited through its insurance business, it also made money from its own speculative investments in the markets. So in the bad year of 1988, Lloyd's was able to make almost £1 billion from investment income to offset its underwriting losses. That escape option has now been closed by the slump.

Stiff competition

On top of this, the City of London—and within it, Lloyd's—is today facing stiffer competition from other financial centres: New York, Tokyo and the European centres in Amsterdam, Zurich, Paris and especially Frankfurt. Over the past 15 years, London's share of the world insurance market has fallen from a half to about a fifth. London is still the world leader, but its position is under threat as never before.

The double pressures of slump and foreign competition have created the circumstances in which Lloyd's names are no longer guaranteed to get richer quick.

Encouraged by the British government, Lloyd's sought to expand capacity in the eighties to withstand the burgeoning competition. The old boy network for recruiting names became more of a new boy network, as many more names were brought in to provide extra capital and credibility in world markets. But all the time premiums were being squeezed to remain competitive, so if there was to be a run of claims, Lloyd's was going to be hit hard.

Since that run arrived, the new names have been in trouble. Many

of the eighties *nouveaux riches* recruited by Lloyd's were themselves beneficiaries of the phoney boom, rich on paper but lacking substance. So, when the losses hit Lloyd's, they had much less to back them up than the more established class of wealthy.

Profit and loss

The higher insurance premiums we have to pay will no doubt boost Lloyd's coffers again. But the generalised slowdown in economic activity means harder times for the world's insurers—and even fiercer competition for the old firm, Lloyd's. So are the days when Lloyd's operated as a benevolent fund for the rich finally over?

Not quite. For a start, the Lloyd's insiders are still doing very nicely, thank you. In 1988, despite the accounting loss, they still made over a third of a billion pounds in expenses from the names. Profit or loss, they still earn their fees and commissions.

Even when Lloyd's declares a loss, it isn't distributed evenly across the syndicates. The vast majority of syndicates made money in 1988; the losses were concentrated in a small number of 'dustbin' syndicates which specialised in reinsuring other syndicates' losses from the big disasters and catastrophes. And, surprise, surprise, the insiders are mainly involved in the *profit-making* syndicates, while outside names have been encouraged by the professionals to concentrate in what became the *loss-making* syndicates.

The insiders' approach of looking after Number One has its chauvinist overtones too; foreigners and non-English speaking investors have borne a disproportionate level of losses since 1988.

The crisis among the new names at Lloyd's demonstrates that today there is less scope than ever for outsiders to join the money-making club at the heart of British capitalism—an ironic insight into the age of the 'classless society'.

Bail out

Now a government-backed rescue of Lloyd's is a possibility. Michael Heseltine, the new supremo at the Department of Trade and Industry, may give the nod to Lloyd's to change its centuries-old custom and allow corporate as well as individual membership. This would help to build up funds in the present crisis and extend Lloyd's survival chances into the future. The government may even allow a retrospective bail-out of the outsider names who have lost so much since 1988. The Lloyd's affair is another example of the dependency culture, in which the state acts as a guarantor for the rich when the going gets tough.



A burden on single mothers

Single mothers, we're told, are a burden on society. They are blamed for rising crime, falling standards of education and general fecklessness and immorality. The increasing number of one-parent families has been described as a national scandal by that most intolerant of organisations, Family and Youth Concern.

It's important for the establishment to hold on to the principle that families need a father and a mother. Those who believe the family to be 'the bedrock of society' need to make sure that we understand that a family (like a dog) is for life. If society can't depend on us all individually to 'look after our own'—our partners, our children, our parents—things start to get difficult.

In a traditional family there is no question of who cares for sick or aged relatives, who takes the kids to and from school and who makes sure there is something in the fridge for tea. But with the 'one-parent family' things are rather different—with two parents there is at least the *possibility* of sharing the responsibilities of parenthood—even if that potential is seldom realised. In a single parent family everything falls into one person's lap. And if that one parent can't manage, the state must foot the bill.

In one sense those crusty old reactionaries in the pro-family organisations have got a point when they claim that children from single parent families are disadvantaged. It is often the case that single parent families are poorer. If there's only one parent with the potential to earn an income—and often that parent is too burdened with parental responsibilities to work outside the home—they are bound to be less well-off.

It is often the case that children of single parents are behind at school. If mum is trying to fit all the housework into the time between arriving home from work and falling exhausted into bed she may not be up to helping with the homework. And it's also the case that the children of one-parent families pay more visits to doctors—probably because a working mum can't afford to have a child off school for a minute longer than necessary.

But all these things tell us about the quality of society, rather than about the quality of single mothers. They reveal the extent to which society relies on a two-parent family and expose the meagre character of the support services that exist outside of it.

If children received an adequate education in schools they wouldn't need to rely on their parents to teach them to read, and if there were adequate welfare benefits single parents wouldn't be financially disadvantaged. The conclusion I draw from the problems faced by single mothers is that capitalist society is unable to provide the support that single mothers need. It is society that is inadequate, not single parents.

Nevertheless Family and Youth Concern take a different view, they believe we are entering a cycle of degeneration. The children of the sixties, argues Valerie Riches, are the single parents of today's delinquents, and today's delinquents will produce the single parents of

tomorrow. Consequently John Patten is already being earbashed by women in high lacy collars about the need to introduce moral education into the national curriculum. They want to see discussions on 'family responsibilities' and 'respect' replace the already pathetic provision for sex education.

Seventy years ago the 'moral right' developed all kinds of inventive theories about why all manner of delinquency, including marital violence or breakdown, ran in families. It was, they argued, in the genes. Today the genetic theory has been replaced by the notion that people carry the values they learn from their parents into their own relationships. So, if your mum and dad were respectful and loving you assimilate this as normal behaviour and have well-balanced relationships yourself. If, on the other hand, they beat the hell out of each other, your own chances of a violent marriage are increased. Moral education is seen as a way to reinforce the positive values of 'familial respect' and 'parental example'.

It makes you wonder how they explain the recent shenanigans in the House of Windsor, which are revealing one of the most comprehensive family breakdowns imaginable. Out of four kids we have one divorce, one pending divorce, one who would almost certainly like to divorce and one who's rumoured to be highly unlikely to ever be in a position to divorce. What kind of example have the Queen and Prince Philip

set their offspring? Whichever way you look at it, HMQ is in the doghouse. Either she's got bad genes or she's done a lousy job of parenting.

But I don't expect we'll see very much discussion about the problems of single parenthood for the royals. Nobody is likely to claim that Princess Anne's freedom from matrimony is about to increase the burden on the state. And I doubt if

anyone would make a serious argument that Fergie's kids would suffer emotional deprivation as a consequence of her separation from Andy. In truth, they probably haven't noticed much difference.

After all, if you can afford to spend £55 000 holidaying in the far east, the single mother situation is slightly different from that faced by those you meet at the Tesco checkout. But let's face it, when Family and Youth Concern talk about single parent families being a burden on society, they are not referring to those who have sufficient income (thanks, in Fergie's case, to state handouts) to maintain their kids in the manner to which they have been accustomed.

It is curious really. While the ordinary single mothers around us bear the stigma of being labelled a 'burden on society', nobody questions the burden of the royals. I'm not suggesting that Anne and Fergie should be under scrutiny for kicking out men I wouldn't share a cup of coffee with. I think they should be under scrutiny just for being royals. If you want to find those who are really a burden on society, look no further than Buckingham Palace and its environs. ●

**It is society
that is inadequate,
not single
parents**



Abolish the

The royal family are under fire from many quarters over their marital mishaps and financial indiscretions. But the problem with the royals goes far deeper than that. Mick Hume sees the existence of the monarchy as a symbol of much that is wrong with British society and its political system today

The monarchy is central to the British way of life. We are expected to stand and sing every time we hear the dread strains of 'God Save the Queen'. We are supposed to be outraged when a foreign politician places a hand on the royal hip, to walk out of cricket dinners when a comedian cracks a joke about HM the Queen, to become apoplectic when a London art club displays a rubbishy painting of Di and Fergie's bare bottoms. In short, being British means showing deep respect for the royals at all times.

But what exactly is it about the royal family that we are supposed to respect? How have they contributed to improving the human condition?

Perhaps we are supposed to respect the literary achievements of the Duchess of York, author of *Budgie the Helicopter*, or of Princess Michael of Kent, twice nominated as plagiarist of

the year. Maybe we are meant to respect the artistic achievements of the theatrical teaboy, Prince Edward. Is it Prince Charles' breakthrough in the science of conversing with wormkind which makes him a man to be respected? Or has Princess Diana won our respect through her services to shopping?

The Queen herself is said to be 'universally' respected. That is little wonder, considering her achievements. She has managed to sit on the throne for 40 years without once going to the toilet during a public engagement. And, with the help of only several hundred nannies, cooks and servants, and the support of a mere fortune in tax-free handouts, she has raised four children to be deadbeats in their own right.

Finally, of course, there is 'the Queen Mum', the nation's favourite great-grandmother. Surely nobody

could fail to respect a lovely old lady who, even in her nineties, is prepared to turn out to support good causes—most recently by unveiling a memorial to one of her favourite war criminals, Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, whose planes decimated the civilian populations of Dresden, Hamburg and Cologne. How sweet.

There is nothing about the royals themselves that could be considered worthy of the public respect which they demand. The fact is that we are expected to bow and scrape to them simply because they were born with the name of Windsor (or obtained it through marriage). It is part of the culture of deference that is one of the most objectionable features of life in modern Britain.

For all John Major's talk of classlessness and citizenship, Britain remains a class society run by a capitalist establishment. Those of



Monarchy

us excluded from the ruling elite are expected to know our place, to respect our 'betters', and to doff the cap to those in authority—even if their only qualification for power is to have been in the right womb at the right time.

The culture of deference centred on the monarchy is a relic of the past that distorts the present. The worship of tradition and servility helps to keep British society in a state of decay, and holds back the human potential to change things for the better.

Attitudes to the monarchy demonstrate how deeply the habit of ring-kissing is ingrained in our 'democratic' political system. Of course the Tories are true-blue royalists. The striking thing, however, is how willing all of the opposition parties are to kowtow to the Queen.

Even the Scottish National Party, that rebellious enemy of the United

Kingdom, has always been careful only to demand independence 'under the Crown'. The consensus of support for the Crown during the general election campaign was best summed up by the Natural Law Party, which spoke for them all in declaring the monarchy to be part of the 'natural order' of things.

You might say that what parties think about the monarchy is irrelevant, and that what matters is their stance on the big issues of the day. Fair enough; but attitudes to the Crown have a symbolic importance that speaks volumes about a party's politics. Their willingness to bend the knee to royalty is a stark illustration of their subservience to the wider establishment and the hierarchical social order. Perhaps the best example of the extent of this problem is the Labour Party.

Even before the Second World War, when Labour liked to portray itself as

a radical party representing the working classes, its leaders were royal toadies of the worst order. The minority Labour governments elected in 1924 and 1929 were supposed to be dangerously left-wing. Yet both gave the game away by sticking to the conventions of swearing loyalty to the Crown and giving the royals huge handouts. As an old Russian revolutionary pointed out at the time, the Labour Party's pretensions to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor could mean nothing if it was not even prepared to deny the Prince of Wales his pocket money.

Today's Labour Party is a creature of the centre ground that has abandoned many of its old traditions and policies, but its belief in fawning before the Crown remains as strong as ever. Throughout the long and intricate election debate about who ought to pay how much income tax, the one issue which no Labour spokesman ever



dreamed of raising was the fact that the Queen pays no tax at all on her fortune.

Never mind revolutionary Marxism, anybody who believes in basic democracy should be in favour of abolishing the British monarchy, along with all of its hereditary privileges and powers. The monarchy is the leftover rubbish of the Middle Ages. But it is more than just an expensive anachronism. It still plays an important part in Britain's undemocratic system of government today.

The case against the monarchy is most often couched in economic terms. *Sun* columnist Richard Littlejohn recently made a 10-minute programme calling for abolition. The BBC banned it. The newspaper asked its readers to express their views. Most of those who wrote in supporting Littlejohn's anti-monarchy opinions did so on the basis that the royals are 'spongers' and 'parasites' who do not deserve a penny of public money.

Royal parasites

The royal family are indeed a fine example of the parasitism at the heart of the capitalist system. Their position demonstrates that, in so far as there is a 'dependency culture' funded by a 'nanny state' in Britain today, it operates in support of the establishment, not the poor.

The royals try to cultivate an image of middle class thrift. So we are told of how the Queen saves bits of string and goes around turning lights off at the palace, or how Diana, Andrew and Edward bought Telecom shares in order to get the £18 rental rebate. Public displays of greed and extravagance, like the Duchess of York's recent island-hopping jaunt or her pocketing of the profits from her 'charity' book *Budgie*, are frowned upon as unroyal. But behind this PR image of frugality and fair play, the Queen and her brood have a lot of ill-gotten loot to hide.

It is impossible accurately to calculate the Queen's fortune.

Estimates vary from a modest £50m plus to a fabulous £15 billion, depending upon the method of calculation used. What is certain is that the royals have not earned a penny of it.

Inherited wealth and the 'tributes' lavished on the family by foreign rulers fill the royal residences so full that the Queen is said to employ two men to wind her clocks at Buck House. The huge overflow of jewellery, art, antiques and other baubles is locked up in a disused aircraft hangar behind a maze of 14-inch steel doors.

On top of these riches, the Queen has three main sources of income. There is her secret profit from multi-million pound investments in stocks and shares (an effortless method of making more money simply by being rich, beloved of every member of the British establishment). There is the £3m a year or so that she accrues in rent and other payments from owning the many properties of the Duchy of Lancaster. And there is the Civil List, through which the royal lifestyle is directly financed by the government.

Family handouts

According to the figures which the government announced in parliament two years ago, during the 1990s the Civil List will give the Queen an average of £7.9m every year. On top of this the Queen Mother gets £640 000, Prince Phillip £360 000, Prince Andrew and Princess Anne a quarter of a million each, etc (*Hansard*, 24 July 1990). Besides the Civil List, Whitehall also shells out a fortune every year to keep the monarch in the manner born, including more than £25m on 'palace maintenance', £9.3m on the royal yacht, £6.7m on the Queen's flight, £2.2m on the royal train and an unknown amount on round-the-clock security (*Economist*, 25 January 1992).

The fulsome financial support given to the royals is a good reflection of the values of a welfare system which

begrudges many impoverished families the price of a second-hand cooker. The class bias built into the system is further highlighted by the Queen's own views on the dangers of providing people with welfare services, as quoted on the recent TV programme, *Elizabeth R*: 'But you see, all the democracies are bankrupt now, because, you know, because of the way that the services have been planned for people to grab.' It seems safe to assume that the grasping people she has in mind do not include the beneficiaries of the Civil List, that social security system for royal spongers.

Sovereign monarch

However, it would be wrong to confine criticism of the royals to economic matters. Too often the arguments about the monarchy get bogged down in an accountants' debate about whether or not it costs the treasury more than it makes for the tourist trade. Such a discussion misses the point about the *political* role which the royal family still plays in Britain. And it is that role which provides the best reasons for abolishing the monarchy altogether.

The schoolbook guide to the constitution has it that Britain is a democracy in which the sovereignty of the people is represented by parliament, and the monarchy just provides the window-dressing. In fact, the British constitution does not recognise popular sovereignty. The foundation of the British constitution is that the monarch is still sovereign. This power has simply been transferred so that it is exercised through parliament.

The monarch still has the right to dissolve parliament, and to appoint *any* parliamentarian to form a cabinet, regardless of election results or public opinion. Of course, the Queen is not about to usurp the authority of the Commons on a personal whim. But it is not too hard to imagine an emergency situation in which the sovereign powers of the monarch might be used to



override parliament on behalf of the ruling class. Those who do find it too hard to imagine might recall the events in Australia in 1975, when the Queen's representative, the governor general, used the monarch's powers to depose an elected Labour government.

Royal prerogative

In any case, it is hardly necessary to construct hypothetical scenarios about what might happen in the future. The sovereign powers of the monarchy are already being used to run Britain on decidedly undemocratic lines, through what is known as the *royal prerogative*. This constitutional device gives the government the right to do all kinds of things in the Crown's name, without the need to consult parliament or to obey the law.

For example, the powers of patronage granted under the royal prerogative give the government a pretty free hand to appoint members of the House of Lords, civil service mandarins, military commanders, judges and other top state officials who run the country without ever submitting themselves to 'the will of the people'. The royal prerogative also allows the government to conduct foreign relations more or less as it pleases, including the right to launch invasions like the Gulf War without asking for the approval of parliament, never mind of the public.

Historical tradition

The use of the royal prerogative helps to mask the authoritarian powers of the British state behind the royal robes and ceremonial mumbo-jumbo of a constitutional monarchy. By mobilising the medieval institution of the monarchy to safeguard a modern 'democratic' state, the capitalists of today also seek to endow their rule with the legitimacy of historical tradition.

The monarchy stands for historical continuity, the notion that nothing important ever changes in Britain—an

idea which those who own and control the country today have every reason to instil in the owned and the controlled. This is the beauty of maintaining the monarchy from the point of view of the establishment, as the *Daily Telegraph* spelled out in its defence of the Queen against recent criticism:

'The Queen's head on coins and stamps, and the crown on government briefcases, and the coat of arms on government buildings, the invocation of her name in parliament and the courts, the prayers for her in church, the oaths sworn to her by the armed forces, all remind the British people that they are under an authority which, although it does not wield political power, provides a permanence that party politics alone cannot furnish.'
(7 February 1992)

The conclusion which the British people are encouraged to draw from the continuity of the monarchy is obvious: since we live under a God-given authority defined by its 'permanence', there is really no point in trying to alter very much about the way in which the country is run. By the same token, it is incumbent upon those who want to put change back on to the political agenda to call for getting rid of the royals.

Who rules?

Of course, it is important to keep the question of royalty in perspective. The monarchy is symbolic of much that is wrong with British society, but it is not the cause of the problems. Abolishing the monarchy will in itself solve nothing. Even without the Queen to front it, the authoritarian state would still be there and the system of government would still be undemocratic.

But calling for the abolition of the monarchy and all of its trappings could help to sweep away some of the mystifications about how Britain is

run—and for whose benefit. Strip away the royal regalia and the illusion of historical legitimacy which goes with it, and the state machine would be better exposed as the servant of the modern capitalist elite. Removing the royal symbol of 'national unity' could help to clarify how our society is divided along class lines.

Culture of deference

The continued existence of the monarchy atop the British constitution, and the willingness of all parties to keep it there, has played an important part in maintaining the stultifying conservatism for which Britain is famous. Bringing the ancient order down can only be good for breathing some new life into British society.

Popularising the demand to abolish the monarchy might also undermine the obnoxious culture of deference that infects every aspect of life in Britain today. At the very least, it would be a step forward for those who want to drag politics in this country out of the seventeenth century on the eve of the twenty-first.

Worshipping the past

The defenders of the status quo insist that we should support the monarchy as the embodiment of Britain's great traditions. That is typical of the way in which the authorities now try to get us to worship the past, to distract from the fact that their slump system can offer us no future. There are, however, some popular British traditions which they are not so keen to revive: like the mid-seventeenth-century tradition of removing the king's head from his shoulders as well as from the currency, or the early nineteenth-century tradition of booing the Queen through the streets of London (which was why Victoria fled to Balmoral).

Somehow the *Sun's* editorial attacks on Fergie seem tame by comparison. It is high time somebody put the public back into republicanism. ●

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The Xha

It's no use looking to the patterns of the past to understand what happened in the election and what comes next. Frank Richards takes issue with the terms of the post-election debate

Was it the issue of tax? Did Neil Kinnock's personality turn off the voters?

Or has the British electorate become irredeemably conservative? Post-election speculation about the success of a poorly prepared and weakly led Conservative Party remains imprisoned within the vocabulary of postwar politics. As could be expected,

right-wing commentators have gloated about the inbred common sense of the ordinary Brit. By contrast, left-wing observers blame the influence of the media rather than the ineptitude of Labour.

What unites the different strands of analysis is the attempt to use the patterns of the past as a guide to assessing contemporary events.

Yet the events of the past few years, culminating in the general election, indicate that we have entered a political era in which the assumptions of postwar British politics make little sense.

There is more at issue here than the fourth defeat of Labour by a relatively unpopular Conservative Party. The election result itself is far less

Question of



of British politics

significant than the collapse of political debate which was so well illustrated during the campaign. British political culture seems too exhausted to keep up even a pretence of controversy. When the war over Jennifer's ear represents the high-point of a national election debate, the absence of conflicting alternatives becomes unavoidably obvious.

One clear symptom of the new political era has not received the consideration it deserves. According to the parliamentary tradition of modern times, the post of Speaker of the House of Commons alternates between Conservative and Labour MPs. As a consequence, since 1951 each new Speaker has been 'elected' to his job unopposed. With the post-election ►



retirement of Speaker Bernard Weatherill, it was Labour's turn to offer a candidate. However, this time many Conservative MPs refused to go along with the tradition of uncontested appointments.

These Tories argued that, after four successive electoral defeats, Labour could no longer be considered as a party comparable to their own. They put forward several Conservative candidates for Speaker in a bid to keep out the Labour nominee, Betty Boothroyd. In the end, enough traditionalist Tories voted with Boothroyd to ensure that she got the job. But the very fact that such an issue could be publicly raised, and a parliamentary convention openly challenged, indicates that the rules of the game have changed.

No more consensus

Some commentators have tried to interpret the election of a Major government as the end of the conflictual Thatcher era, and a return to the political consensus of postwar Britain. In fact, the shifts in the political climate indicate that there is no going back. The demise of old-fashioned party politics, and the consolidation of a one-party state, with a one-party culture and a one-party media, has no precedent in Britain.

Throughout this century, governing parties, even when they possessed large majorities, faced some sort of coherent alternative. There were bitter political conflicts and something substantial to argue about. The political period today is distinguished not merely by the absence of alternatives, but by the fact that no party, not even the one in government, can engage the electorate with so much as a semblance of a political programme.

In all the confusion and the mayhem concerning the internal squabbling of Labour, it is easy to remain oblivious to the far more significant development in British politics; the incoherence of contemporary Conservatism.

New Majorism?

Left-wing commentators in particular have the irritating, if predictable, habit of explaining away Labour's defeats by reference to some special power which the Tories possess. This was the content of the wearisome Thatcherism thesis of the eighties. Today, similar arguments are rehashed to suggest that John Major has tapped into some deep and traditional popular instinct. Thus left historian Raphael Samuel writes of John Major's 'instinctive feel for tradition', suggesting that the man from Brixton possessed a special rapport with ordinary people (*Guardian*, 18 April 1992). In endowing Major with popular appeal, Samuel shows just how out of touch he is from everyday life.

Nevertheless, like the Thatcherism thesis, the left's belief in 'Majorism' serves a purpose. It invites Labour to accommodate further to conservatism, on the grounds that this is the only way to find popular resonance in Britain. In reality, Major and his party look plausible only in relation to their opponents. As for Major's popular touch...a casual conversation with the punters in just about any public bar should disabuse the left intellectuals of this prejudice.

The post-election squabbling inside the Labour Party is more than a response to the experience of defeat. It indicates that this is now a party of cliques and individuals rather than any sort of political movement. Labour's apparent embarrassment over the vestiges of its trade union connections indicates that the labour movement as such is extinct. The predictable calls for changing the name from 'Labour' to something less offensive are unlikely to strengthen the party. In the context of defeat, name changes suggest shame and an admission of guilt. Recent experience shows that parties which change their names in a bid to gain public acceptance merely accelerate their decline.

Escape clauses

It is fashionable in liberal circles to blame the electorate for the prevailing state of British politics. The images of selfish and greedy southerners, of Essex Man, are contrasted with the lofty altruistic sentiments of the Lib-Lab tradition. Others, like Neil Kinnock, blame the Tory media. But it is essentially the same argument since, in blaming the media, the finger is ultimately pointed at the gullible and stupid readers of the Tory tabloid press.

To get away from this self-serving discussion and clarify what is genuinely at issue, it may prove useful to summarise the main distinctive features in contemporary British politics.

● Lack of choice

It is difficult to recall a time when people were offered so little choice during a British general election. The debate during the 1992 election was confined to peripheral matters. Arguments about the percentage points of taxation tended to obscure the fact that the parties had a common diagnosis and a common cure for economic problems.

The character of the capitalist system of production was not in dispute. All of the parties accepted the existing economic realities, including the continuation of mass unemployment and austere controls on public spending. The opposition parties promised to improve the provision of public services only within the terms of these realities, conceding

that making British business profitable must come first.

There was no argument about defence, foreign affairs, law and order or racism. Nor was there a clash between alternative visions of society. Probably the most significant debates were over devolution for Scotland and other constitutional reforms. However, the very concern of the opposition with these issues indicated the lack of differences on matters of substance.

Devolution and constitutional reform are token attempts to make the existing state more responsive. Such a debate is not about social change or an alternative vision of life. It is about tinkering with the old institutions. Anyone inspired by the wholly acceptable call for proportional representation ought to ask if anything would be different under that kind of a regime. Given the absence of differences on fundamentals, an election organised under proportional representation would still lead to the triumph of the same governing policies.

The absence of political debate tends to add an element of instability to party politics. It means that policy is developed on the hop. What is deemed to be unpopular is quickly and quietly modified—as was the case with Labour's timetable for the implementation of its tax plans.

● End of left-right distinctions

The narrowing of party political debate has accelerated the erosion of the meaning of 'left' and 'right' in mainstream politics. This was an election of centre parties vying to occupy the same space. The word 'socialist' did not appear in the Labour manifesto, nor did the word 'capitalist' feature in the Tory programme. From time to time during the campaign somebody might use such language, but not with any great conviction.

The Thatcherite Tory Party won the 1987 election with an ideologically charged campaign. This time around, the Tory Party became far more guarded in its pronouncements. It is no less the party of big business than before; but having lost the ability to galvanise their audience, Major's men were concerned to widen their appeal by offending nobody.

As for the left, what does it mean now? The term is used so promiscuously that even a man like Bryan Gould, a creation of the Labour Party machine, can today be identified as the candidate of the left in the party's leadership election! On this criterion, former Labour right stalwarts like Denis Healey or even James Callaghan would today be described as men of the left.

In the context of British party politics the term left simply has no meaning. What are the distinctive

left-wing policies on offer? A bit more tax? An end to opting out in the NHS? Without even a pretence of offering major social reform or a serious redistribution of wealth, none of the parties deserves to be identified with anything that can remotely be construed as left-wing.

The lack of meaning now attached to the term left-wing was shown during the election campaign, when it was difficult to decide which of the main parties was the least conservative. Indeed, on many occasions it appeared that the Liberal Democrats were more radical than Labour. In this confused climate, many probably concluded that this party of the dead centre offered the most systematic challenge to the status quo.

● Premature ageing

Probably the single most important statistic to emerge from the election concerns the voting pattern of those aged between 18 and 24. Although many of this generation voted for

underlines the evolving image of the labour movement as history. For many young people there is nothing radical about voting for Labour.

There is, of course, also an element of deradicalisation in all of this. In the absence of credible anti-capitalist policies, many young people experience the present slump with anxiety and fear. They are only too aware that their career options are minimal, and are ready to accept the view that their interest is best served by the 'competent' management of a Tory government. With nothing else on offer such a response becomes inevitable.

● No protest vote

The ageing of youth and the absence of political alternatives has had the effect of deactivating almost all sections of British society.

Consequently in Britain (unlike in other parts of Europe where the mainstream parties are also losing their grip), there was a clear absence

from seeing its underlying fragility. British party political institutions are in decay. Concern with the weak constituency base of the Conservative Party is but one symptom of this process. More important is the public inertia of the victors in the election. The Tory government is going through the motions. It is fast running out of state industries to privatise. It has scope for a few more laws against unions and potential immigrants—but not much more. Its most visionary initiative, launching David Mellor as Secretary for National Heritage, minister for celebrating Britain's past, has something cheap and tawdry about it.

Internal collapse

The new government's lack of political coherence means that it is unlikely to emerge intact from the challenge of managing the capitalist slump. Without any defined objectives or a sense of direction, every difficult decision will help expose the government's political exhaustion. The only thing that the Conservatives have in their favour is a uniquely flaccid and aimless opposition party. But this advantage is no longer likely to compensate for the internal corrosion of the Conservative Party.

It now seems that Labour will follow the fortunes of the turn-of-the-century Liberal Party and cease to be a contender for governing Britain. This decline of Labourism is to be welcomed. At the very least it clarifies the problem of nobody posing an alternative to capitalist politics. The end of the Labourist tradition ought to provide a stimulus to those concerned with the project of human emancipation. It demonstrates that piecemeal criticisms of capitalism and half-hearted reforms only discredit the cause of social change.

Boldness and vision

So what is the future for opposition politics in Britain? There seems little point in prolonging the old political arrangements by arguing for constitutional reforms or other proposals to democratise existing state institutions. Such an orientation fails to address the more fundamental question of what kind of society we need—and why capitalism cannot provide it.

What is required is boldness and vision. One lesson of Labour's demise is that people will only move if there is something really big to fight for. It may sound ultimatic, but the fact is that no progressive argument can make sense today unless it is based upon a rejection of society as it is presently constituted. To breathe life back into opposition politics, the narrow terms on which debate now takes place need to be challenged by engaging in a battle of ideas. ●

People will only move if there is something really big to fight for



Labour, there was a surprisingly large shift to the Conservatives. It appears that a larger percentage of young people voted Tory than at any time since the war.

The voting pattern of the youth is not the result of the reinvigoration of Conservatism. It is the product of a number of developments which are mutually reinforcing. First of all, there is an absence of alternatives. In particular, the lack of radical visions means that the potential idealism of this generation is seldom realised, at least not in a political form.

Secondly, identifying with Labour no longer necessarily implies anything radical. Indeed for many young people Labour is the most conservative or old-fashioned of all the parties. The ease with which Tory media experts are able to depict trade unions as dinosaurs with little purpose

of a protest vote. Even the lovable Greens, who recently appeared to be making some significant gains, were all but annihilated in the election. In Scotland, where protest enjoyed a degree of momentum, the Scottish National Party failed to make the gains that it had expected.

The absence of a protest vote testifies to the stupefaction of British politics. The extraordinary intellectual collapse of opposition forces has created a situation of political stasis. Temporarily at least, a sense of fear overwhelms the desire to act. Even hitherto politically active individuals have been forced to retreat. Mind-numbing campaigns on electoral reform are about as far as most old 'activists' are prepared to go.

The palpable exhaustion of British politics can easily distract the observer

Kirk Williams criticises the post-election response of the Scottish Labour and Scottish National parties

We were promised a Tory Free Zone. Govan MP, Jim Sillars, predicted thousands of Scots gathering at Glasgow airport to wave goodbye to departing Tory Scottish secretary 'Michael For-South' (geddit?) as he fulfilled his promise to emigrate south and look for new employment. After all the blarney is over, the Tories are left as the second party in parliamentary seats and votes, and Jim Sillars is the one looking through the jobs pages.

The Scottish general election results broke many hearts and careers. After 13 years many Scots hoped that the election would finally see the back of the Tories. The bombshell result has left many people confused as to why the Tories are still here. The one thing all of the opposition parties in Scotland now agree upon is that the blame lies to the south.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has blamed the Labour Party for 'conning' the Scottish people into voting for it by offering the false dawn of a UK Labour government. Some SNP leaders such as Sillars have accused their own erstwhile supporters of being '90-minute patriots'.

However, they have saved their greatest scorn for the English working class, especially so-called Essex or Basildon Man. As the singer and prominent SNP supporter Pat Kane

put it in the *Glasgow Herald*, 'don't forget what you could have voted for, if you'd known a week earlier which way Basildon Man and Co was eventually going to fall'.

The Scottish Labour Party has echoed much of this. Some members can be heard arguing that the English only vote for 'selfishness and greed'. Some Scottish Labour MPs were the first to demand that Neil Kinnock should go, and have blamed their fourth defeat in a row on the Labour Party in the rest of Britain.

The question all of these opportunist politicians are avoiding is this: if the problems of the opposition parties are the fault of the English, then why did so many people in Scotland reject them as well?

For or against?

The irony is that Scotland was probably the one place where the Tories' three-week election campaign proved effective. The Conservatives adopted the high-risk tactic of trying to polarise the constitutional question between outright independence and the Union. The result was to put the squeeze on the Labour and Liberal parties, by making their devolution proposals look wishy washy and forcing them to come out with their own pro-Union prejudices.

By forcing a discussion on the consequences of independence, the Tories also put the spotlight on some of

the more moonbeam policies of the SNP. It was often comedy night seeing SNP politicians try to defend themselves in the media.

The result of all this was that the Tory vote went up, a markedly better performance than in the rest of the UK. Labour and Liberal support declined from their 1987 positions. The SNP's supposed take-off never really got off the tarmac; it was promising 37 seats on the eve of the election, it now has three.

It was clear throughout the election that none of the opposition parties was able to enthuse the electorate. No matter which party's election meeting you attended, there was always more empty seats than attenders, more shuffling of feet than questions and a real lack of excitement or enthusiasm—a marked contrast to the state of political ferment portrayed in the media's version of the Scottish campaign. Meanwhile, the high stakes which the Tories were playing for ensured that they got their vote out.

Lame ducks

The May council elections in Scotland confirmed the lack of dynamism behind any of the opposition parties, as Labour slipped back and the SNP again failed to make a significant breakthrough.

The political geography of Scotland may seem little different after the general election. But the potential fallout from a fourth Tory term with 49 Labour MPs sitting in Scotland like lame ducks has led many to think about their political futures and party alignments. They are thinking local.

This is a pattern that is being reproduced throughout Europe. The old left is becoming ever-more marginal to mainstream politics, losing national elections badly. In response,

No retreat Hadrian's

many on the left are seeking solace in regional redoubts. The regionalisation of the left is the logical next step for those who have long given up fighting on the big issues—like racism, militarism, or women's rights. For those who no longer believe (if they ever really did) that it is possible to change the world, retreating and trying to build local power bases is the cause of the moment.

In withdrawing into Scotland and Scottish issues, the old left is simply sidestepping its political problems. It is effectively blaming external factors—such as the English voter—for its own lack of political appeal. Many on the Scottish left are now adopting a strategy not unlike that seen in Eastern Europe over recent years, where discredited politicians from the old order have tried to salvage their careers by putting on nationalist hats.

Pact fever

Major party realignments are probably still some way off in Scotland. But there is a growing demand for alliances and pacts. Within the Labour Party, the debate is between those who want to move towards an alliance with the nationalists, and those who see no need to change. It is not a left-right split but one along Unionist—nationalist lines.

All of the old institutions of the left and the labour movement are likely to come under this pressure. The growing row between British trade union leader Bill Jordan and the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), over whether the STUC should concentrate on preserving jobs (that would be a first) or campaigning for constitutional change, is indicative of the likely trend.

There is much talk in Scotland about dropping differences, sharing platforms and offering the 'hand of cooperation'

for the common aim of constitutional change. There are now at least seven cross-party groupings in Scotland proposing some form of constitutional change. The memberships and even the spokesmen for these groups are often interchangeable. They are the people who have led every failed attempt at constitutional change over the past 13 years.

The latest groupings are Common Cause and Scotland United. Common Cause represents all the worst aspects of the Scottish chattering classes. They could be found on election day hoping that the Scottish Office were already preparing the alterations to the Scottish Assembly building on Calton Hill in Edinburgh, to transform it into a real working parliament.

Labour somersault

Scotland United has been set up in a blaze of media hype. Newspaper reports put the size of the two rallies in Glasgow's George Square at even bigger than the organisers' exaggerated claims. The aim of this campaign is to force the Major government to hold a multi-option referendum on Scotland's political future. This has been SNP policy for two years. It is now supported by all parties bar the Tories. The Scottish Labour Party performed an immediate post-election somersault from its long opposition to a referendum, for fear of being marginalised and losing its nationalist wing.

Several leading politicians associated with Scotland United have hinted at the need for civil disobedience and to 'live a little dangerously' to gain the referendum. This is pretty rich coming from the likes of Labour MP George Galloway, who condemned the poll tax protesters in Trafalgar

Square as 'lunatics, anarchists and other extremists' (see *Living Marxism*, May 1990), or Charles Gray, Labour leader of Strathclyde Regional Council, who supported the jailing of poll tax non-payers. Gray has already rejected the request from Glasgow teachers to stop docking their wages for boycotting the Tory programme of testing primary school children.

The fact that these manoeuvring politicians are able to put themselves at the forefront of the campaign for change in Scotland is testimony to the low expectations of those involved.

The question which none of these groups have been able to answer is this: why should a local parliament do any favours for Scottish people? Why should a geographical reorganisation of the system of government solve Scottish people's problems? Those living close to Westminster in Brixton and Hackney don't seem to have benefited much from having a handy local parliament.

Who rules?

What matters is not *where* a parliamentary talking shop stands. What matters is *who* has control over society. In Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, power rests with the capitalists and the state machine which serves their interests. Having a parliament in Edinburgh or the Outer Hebrides can make no difference in a society where the ownership of wealth decides who rules.

A referendum on whether the government should sit in Whitehall or Edinburgh would offer Scottish people no choice at all. Channelling opposition politics into a campaign demanding such a useless referendum is a diversion away from tackling the big issues in the Tories' fourth term. ●

t behind Wall

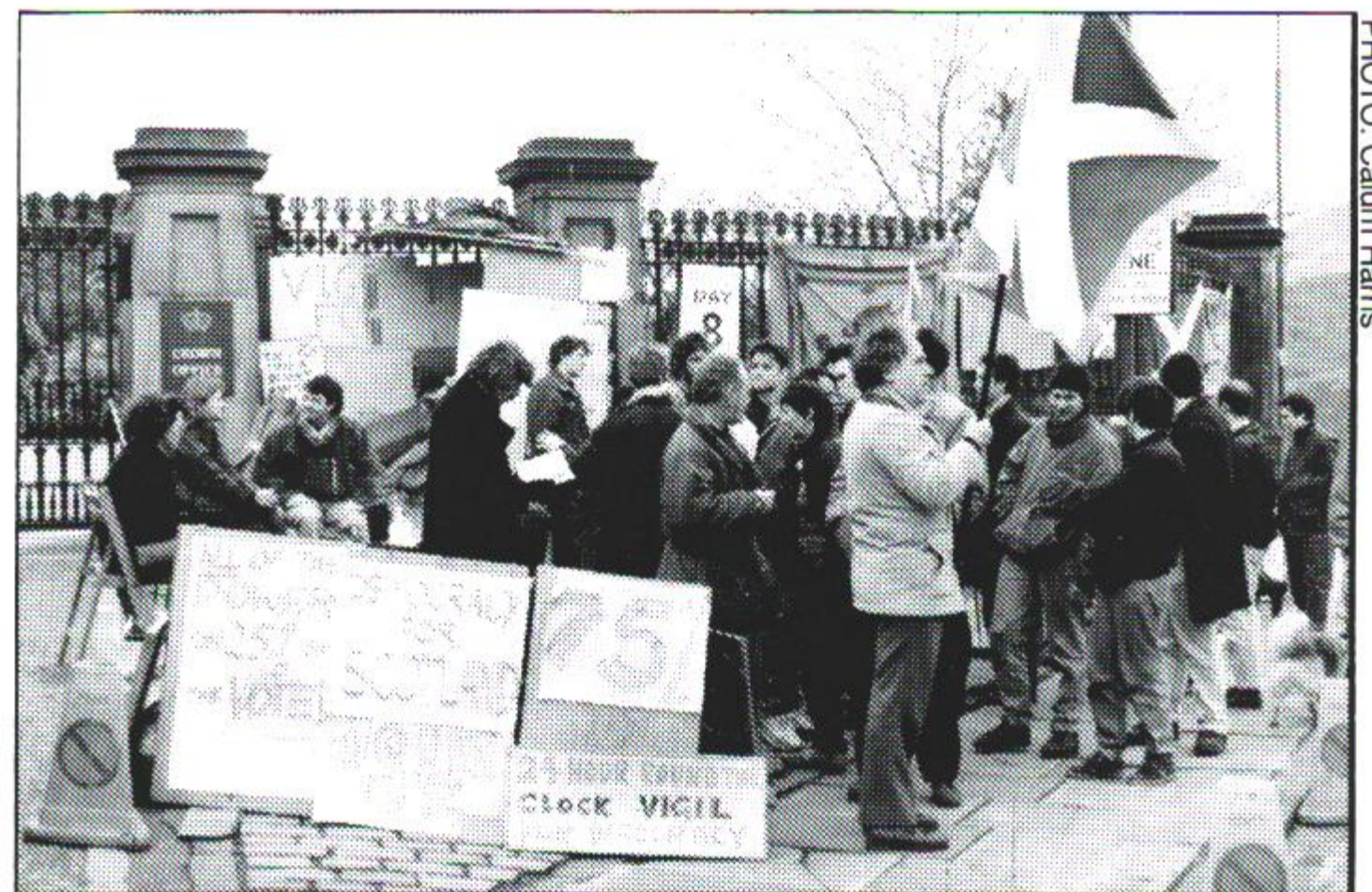
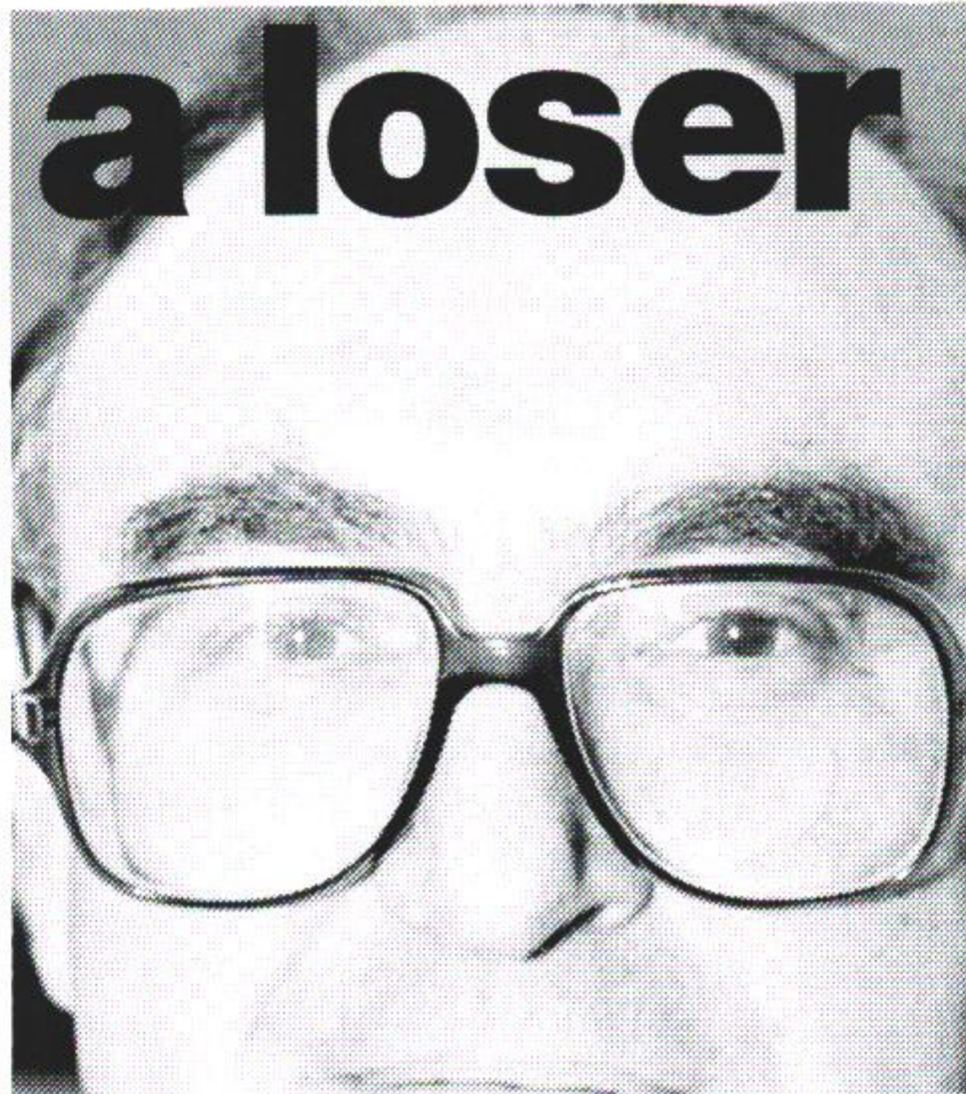


PHOTO: Calum Harris

Electing a loser



As the Labour Party prepares to elect a new leader in July, Mike Freeman sees its prospects going from bad to worse

Following its humiliating electoral defeat, Labour's chaotic leadership election seems set to accelerate the fragmentation of the party and confirm its demise as a serious contender for government.

The problem facing the candidates in the Labour leadership election is that they were all centrally involved in the transformation of the party's programme, organisation and image that led to its defeat. The central justification for all the changes wrought by the Kinnock team since 1983 was that they were the price that had to be paid to make Labour 'electable'. The result on 9 April confirmed that, after all, the new-look Labour Party was 'unelectable'. But having closed off all other avenues and excluded all other points of view, the only possible response from Kinnock's former acolytes is to go even further down the route he charted.

John Smith and Bryan Gould may argue about the details of taxation and fiscal policy, but they agree on the broad strategy of turning Labour into an alternative Tory Party. But, as the election showed, when offered the choice between a real Conservative Party and an

imitation, voters will opt for the genuine article.

The succession struggle reveals the dissolution of the old left-right axis around which factional conflict has always been organised in the Labour Party. The candidates do not represent different ideological trends in the party; they are backed by cliques based on personal loyalties and patronage. This is true of Smith and Gould, and of deputy leadership contenders Margaret Beckett and John Prescott. Though they may have different backgrounds outside and inside the party, and they may quibble over tax and the ERM, they are all Kinnockite clones, opportunist careerists, lacking principle or imagination.

Left out

The same was true of the left slate of Ken Livingstone and Bernie Grant. It was widely noted that, while Livingstone accepted the backing of the Socialist Campaign Group, he took a different view on the ERM, on PR and on taxation, on which subject he criticised Smith for excessive redistributionist zeal! Indeed, it seems that the only things on which Livingstone and

Grant agreed were that the election procedure was unfair but that it offered considerable scope for attracting publicity. With only 13 and 15 MPs' nominations respectively, Livingstone and Grant could not even persuade the majority of the Campaign Group to support them.

What democracy?

It is true that Labour's electoral procedures are a farce. They confirm that 'democracy' in the Labour Party is simply a cipher for factional advantage. Thus the requirement for a leadership candidate to secure the nominations of 20 per cent of the parliamentary party was introduced in the interests of inner-party democracy, of course; but the real purpose was to block a leadership challenge from Tony Benn after the 1987 election.

The trade union block vote was written into Labour's constitution in 1919 by Sidney Webb to ensure that the trade union leaders, Labour's founders and paymasters, retained control over the vehicle designed to advance their political aspirations. For decades the block vote was used to contain the left and ensure a party leadership and policy conducive to the interests of the labour bureaucracy. Its undemocratic character passed unnoticed in the parliamentary Labour Party, among the Tories and in the media.

Divorcing partners

Now that the labour bureaucracy is no longer protected by the British establishment, and the Labour Party no longer serves much useful purpose for either, the block vote is fair game. An acceleration of the divorce between Labour and the unions appears certain. It now seems only a matter of time before the unions opt to spend their money more pragmatically in specific campaigns, and the Labour Party becomes a permanent minority rump in parliament.

Kinnock's desire for a rapid succession seems to have been grounded in a serious concern that a prolonged leadership struggle might finish Labour off for good. Such stratagems look more and more like a case of postponing the inevitable. ●

PHOTO: Micael Kramer

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Rethinking the future

Victim or war criminal?



Daniel Nassim on why Japan presents such an ambivalent attitude towards the Second World War

The Second World War is a key point of discussion for all of the major powers. For the USA and Britain, the war represents a triumph of national heroism. For Germany and Japan, the war remains, even 47 years on, an acute embarrassment.

Britain and America's hankering after their supposedly glorious pasts can only be understood in relation to the troubled present. Both countries need to rerun history to compensate for their lack of dynamism today. It is far easier to show the *Dambusters* on television than to rebuild Britain's aircraft industry.

For Japan matters are less straightforward. The Japanese experienced the war as a national disaster. As Japan's relative economic strength pushes it towards the centre of global affairs once more, revising the history of the war becomes an essential part of legitimising Japan's new relations with the outside world.

The difficulty in discussing the war is shown in Japan's 'diplomacy of contrition' towards its East Asian neighbours. Whenever Japanese ministers travel to Asia, it seems, they make a mandatory apology for Japan's past behaviour. So, in January, during a trip to South Korea, Japanese premier Kiichi Miyazawa issued an official apology over the press-ganging of Korean 'comfort women' to serve as prostitutes for the imperial army.

Despite this public display of contrition, it would be a mistake to assume that Japan accepts the Anglo-Saxon view of its wartime behaviour. It is more that Japan has a different understanding of what the war was about.

Samurai soldiers

For the Allied powers the 'Pacific War' is recalled primarily as a war of Japanese atrocities against US and British prisoners. This is the war epitomised in the *Bridge over the River Kwai*. It was also a war of inhuman modern-day samurai soldiers and kamikaze pilots stoically defending Pacific islands against the US advance. Japan's murder of 20m Asians in the war barely warrants a footnote in this Western account.

Japan's view of the war is entirely different. Japan is presented as the *victim* of Western aggression, as symbolised by the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the internment without trial of thousands of Japanese in the USA. On the fiftieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbour last December, while Americans were being told about Japan's sneak attack, the Japanese were told that Japan was forced into attacking America. (Neither story is exactly true—see 'Harbouring Illusions', *Living Marxism*, December 1991.)

The view of Japan as victim also comes across in Japanese cinema. War films in the USA and Britain are about the daring exploits of the military against German or Japanese opponents. Those made in Japan are invariably about Japanese suffering.

Images which do not accord with the view of Japan as victim are struck from the records. This is why references to the rape of Nanjing, where the Japanese slaughtered 200 000 Chinese in 1937, are kept out of school textbooks. It is why an academic like Shoichi Watanabe can breeze through the evidence and conclude that

'the massacre in Nanjing did not occur' ('The Emperor and the militarists', *Japan Echo*, XVIII(2) 1991).

A popular sub-theme of the Japan-as-victim view is that the USA waged a racial war against the Japanese. In *The Japan that Can Say No*, Shintaro Ishihara, a maverick conservative politician and popular novelist, puts the point bluntly:

'The United States bombed German cities and killed many civilians but did not use atomic bombs on the Germans. US planes dropped them on us because we are Japanese. Every American I mention this to denies that race was the reason, but the fact remains that nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We should never forget this. The same virulent racism underlies trade friction with the United States.'(p28)

This theme is not considered particularly right-wing in Japan.

At first sight, Japan's 'diplomacy of contrition' in East Asia and its frequent apologies for the war seem to contradict the view of Japan as victim. In reality, the difference is between what Japan presents to the outside world and the debate inside the country.

Big spender

Last December there was a long debate among Japanese politicians about whether to apologise for Pearl Harbour. Eventually an apology was published in English which said that Japan was 'deeply remorseful' for the attack. The Japanese language text, however, only said that Japan 'deeply reflects' on its actions.

This dichotomy also explains the debate inside Japan on Article Nine of the constitution. This clause, which was written by the Americans when they occupied Japan after the war, states that Japan renounces war and will have no armed forces.

In one sense the debate about the clause is academic since, whatever the constitution says, Japan is the third largest military spender in the world. The debate is important, however, because it pertains to how Japan's role in the outside world is seen. Since the war the Americans have had ultimate responsibility for Japan's security. To challenge this arrangement would disrupt Japan's key bilateral relationship. Yet

America's decline relative to Japan has created new pressures to adjust the power balance in their relationship. These contemporary tensions find expression in the discussion of the war and the postwar constitution.

Japan's apologies to East Asian states also have more to do with its present ambitions than its guilt about the past. Apologies for the war are invariably linked to a bid for a bigger economic stake in East Asia. It is the return of the old Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere in the guise of conciliation.

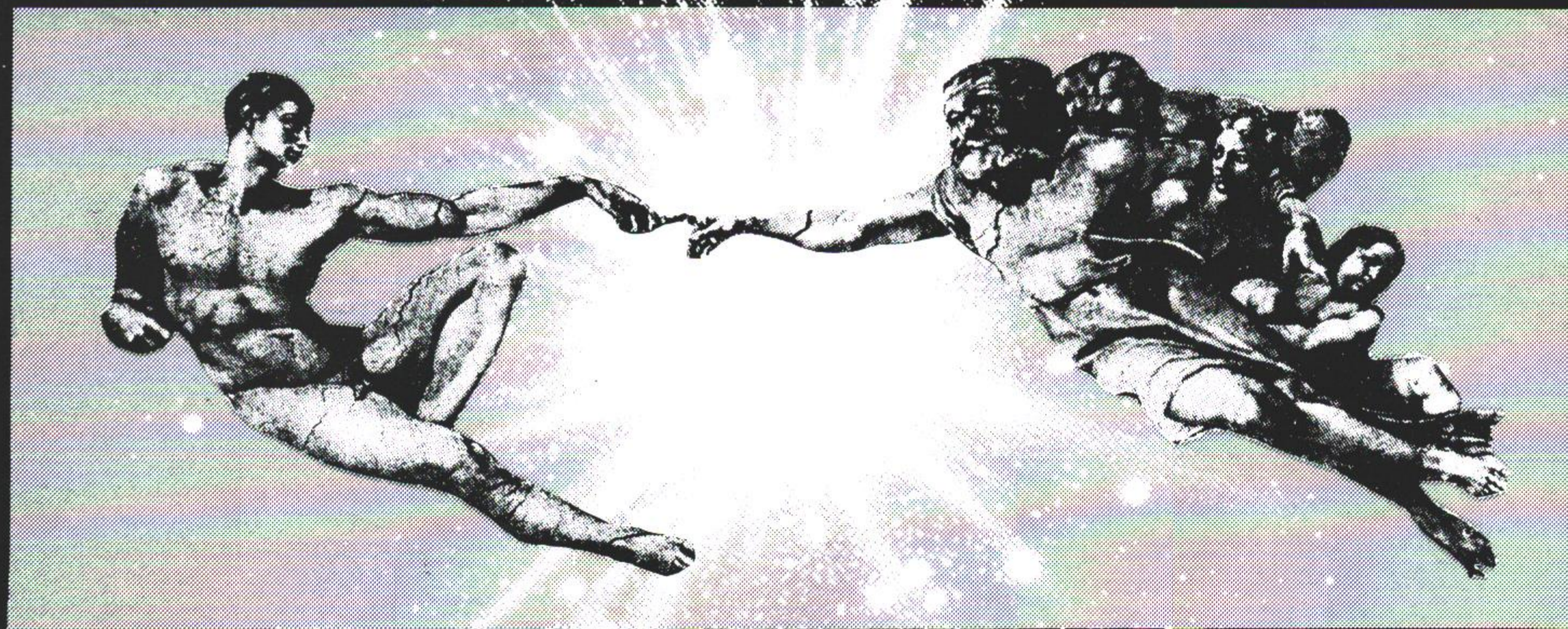
Japan's debate about the Second World War is no historical matter. The outcome of the war forced Japan into a junior partnership with the USA in exchange for a guarantee of global security. As the old world order collapses, Japan's concern is to reforge its relations with the Western powers and its neighbours, so as to safeguard its place in the new. This is the hidden agenda behind the ongoing Japanese controversy about what happened last time.



Illustration: Keiji Nakazawa

A major scientific breakthrough is being twisted into an argument for religion. John Gibson and Manjit Singh reply to the mystics

God and



the Big Bang

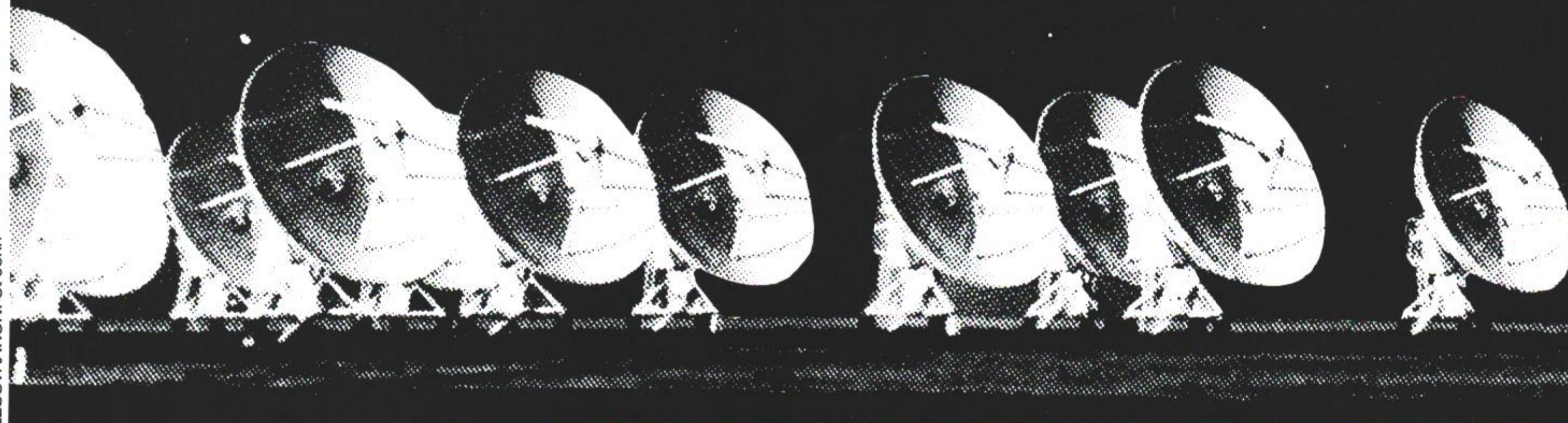


ILLUSTRATION: St. John

If you're religious, it's like looking at God', said George Smoot, leader of the Cosmic Background Explorer (Cobe) research team, unveiling its sensational findings in April.

Cobe had peered back across the universe to within 300 000 years of creation. There they had detected the 'ripples' that would one day lead to galaxies and stars. The discovery was called the find of the century by the scientific establishment. In the media, it was used primarily to heat up the debate about the relationship between science and religion.

Time and space

The Cobe satellite was launched in November 1989, after years of delay due to the Challenger disaster, to investigate cosmic radiation without the interference of terrestrial phenomena such as man-made radio noise. Studying radiation gives us a clue as to what the universe was like far back in time, because it takes time for the radiation to reach us. So, for example, in looking at the sun we see it as it was approximately eight minutes ago. By using this method Cobe has managed to look back in some detail to over 14 billion years ago.

In April, eager scientists packed into the meeting of the American Physical Society in Washington to hear Smoot announce the discovery of 'evidence for the birth of the universe'. Michael Turner of Chicago University believed that Smoot's team had found nothing less than the 'holy grail of cosmology'. They had shown that the 'Big Bang' model of how the universe began is consistent with the way in which the universe is structured today. (How?—see box, page 36)

Designed by deity

But 'what caused the Big Bang?' is the obvious next question. And the most striking feature of the public debate around the latest findings has been the increased willingness of commentators to invoke God as the initiator. The Vatican has long argued that the Big Bang was the work of God. In a sense, the latest findings have added weight to a related 'scientific' argument for the existence of God: the argument from design.

The shorthand version of the argument goes like this. Of all the unimaginable ways in which the universe could have developed, it just so happened that it developed in a way which has led to human life. That is a highly unlikely occurrence, statistically speaking, according to current theories. This is taken as evidence that the formation of the universe must have been an act

of design. Top physicist Paul Davies argues the case in his book, *The Cosmic Blueprint*:

'The very fact that the universe is creative, and that the laws have permitted complex structures to emerge and develop to the point of consciousness—in other words, that the universe has organised its own self-awareness—is for me powerful evidence that there is "something going on" behind it all. The impression of design is overwhelming. Science may explain all the processes whereby the universe evolves its own destiny, but that still leaves room for there to be a meaning behind existence.' (p203)

Elsewhere Davies has gone even further: 'It may seem bizarre, but in my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion.' (*God and the New Physics*, pix)

Destroyed by Darwin

The argument from design is of course far from new. The most famous example of the argument in modern times was put forward by the Anglican priest and naturalist William Paley in his book *Natural Theology* (1802). Paley drew the analogy that if you found a watch while walking across a moor, you wouldn't think it was an accident equivalent to finding a stone. You would be certain that somebody had made it. Yet everywhere in nature we see things much more complex than a watch. For example, the human eye. From this Paley deduced the existence of God, the grand designer.

Charles Darwin destroyed the arguments of Paley and others in the mid-nineteenth century with his explanation of natural evolution. Darwin established that chance mutation and natural selection were all that was needed to explain the complexity and diversity of life on earth.

Darwinism still poses problems for theologians. It asks very difficult questions about any notion of a personal God, and certainly shatters any claims that the Bible can be taken as literal truth. But the problems are not insurmountable for theologians with a creative streak. Since Darwin, supporters of the design argument have retreated further back in time (and so further away from anything that can be definitely disproved), in order to defend their case. And you can't get further back than the Big Bang!

It may seem fantastic that the development of the universe was such that human life could emerge, but then it seemed fantastic to Paley's generation that the human eye existed until Darwin showed the way. The development of science has always tended to explain the fantastic.

Even without the assistance of further scientific advances in cosmology, however, it is possible to ask which is more fantastic: the fact that we are here to ponder retrospectively the probability of our own existence on the basis of natural laws, or the notion that a supreme being outside of space-time went to so much trouble to create a universe with planet Earth tucked away in one corner just for us?

For the moment, the beauty of the Big Bang for the theologians is that, according to modern science, it does not make sense to talk about what happened before the Big Bang. In scientific terms, it is literally a meaningless question.

This illustrates that there will always be questions concerned with first causes which are not susceptible to definite scientific answers. In order to accept any explanation of such matters, an act of faith is required. As Paul Davies puts it: 'In the end it all boils down to a question of belief.' (*God and the New Physics*) You either believe in God or you don't.

And there, we might think, the issue should rest, to be discussed along with 'how many angels can you fit on a pin-head?' and other such questions. But that would be to misunderstand the debate between science and religion as it takes place in the Western world in 1992. Many believers insist that only religion, rather than science, can provide a meaning for life. Unfortunately, in this weary and confused time, they are being taken more seriously than they might have been in the recent past.

Souls and slugs

According to Rev John Polkinghorne, president of Queen's College, Cambridge, and a scientist: 'God is not the answer to who lit the blue touch paper which set off the Big Bang, but why it was lit. He is the answer to the meaning and purpose of the world. Therefore religion has nothing to fear from science.' (*Sunday Times*, 26 April 1992)

In his new book, *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man*, Bryan Appleyard of the *Sunday Times* takes this a step further. According to Appleyard, all science tells us is that people are 'meaningless accidents in a cold universe' (p67). In his caricatured account, science tells us that we are born, we die, and are of no more significance than a stellar nebula or a slug. For Appleyard, if humanity is to regain a sense of purpose in life, and so save itself, it must return to the centrality of religious faith.

There is an alternative view of 'the meaning of life'. In terms of cosmic evolution, humanity is

The briefest history of time

In the 1920s Edwin Hubble found that the light from distant galaxies was stretched towards the red end of the visible spectrum. This effect, known as the redshift, was found to be greater the further away the galaxy. The redshift of light from distant galaxies is evidence that they are moving away from us. The static model of the universe was now replaced by an expanding one. Looking backwards, this led theorists to propose that the universe exploded into being in a Big Bang, from a point known as a singularity, about 15 billion years ago.

That was the theory. The search for the 'holy grail of cosmology' really started accidentally in 1964, when Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson at the Bell Laboratories in New Jersey discovered a weakly hissing radio noise wherever they pointed their telescope. Unable to get rid of it, even after they removed the pigeons living in their peculiar horn-shaped radio telescope, they had to conclude that it was a natural phenomenon of cosmic origin. They had found the 'cosmic background radiation'—the echo of the Big Bang.

One problem remained. The cosmic background radiation was smooth and uniform. But according to the theory, lumps and holes in the early universe should have manifested themselves as areas of hot and cold in the distribution of the cosmic background radiation. They did not. This suggested that matter in the universe was uniformly distributed after the Big Bang. The fact is, however, that we exist on planet Earth in a solar system in the Milky Way, our galaxy. So the universe is not smooth and uniform.

How did galaxies arise if, after 300 000 years, the universe was smooth and uniform and showed no sign of lumpiness? Gravity would have been unable to pull matter into the clumpy formations in which it exists in the universe today, structures which were the precondition for the development of humans among other things. Cobe's observations of ripples have at last suggested a solution.

After the Big Bang, the model predicts, the universe was filled with a hot 'soup' of charged particles permeated by radiation. It was only after 300 000 years, when the expanding universe had cooled sufficiently (to 6000 kelvin), that the atoms of hydrogen, deuterium, helium and lithium were created. This period is called the time of recombination. At this stage, the universe is no longer opaque to radiation and light; it is this period that Cobe has observed. The models had suggested that some areas would be denser than others, that there would be lumps and holes. The fluctuations which Cobe was looking for were approximately 30 millionths of one degree centigrade in the temperature of cosmic background radiation from different areas of space.

Time was beginning to run out for the Big Bang model. Jasper Wall of the Royal Greenwich Observatory summed up the situation: 'If Cobe hadn't found the fluctuations, we would have had to rethink a lot of our basic theories—including general relativity.' There was enormous relief among astronomers and theorists when the results from Cobe agreed with the theoretical predictions. These ripples from the edge of time confirm that 300 000 years after the Big Bang there existed gargantuan clouds, hundreds of millions of light years across, from which, over billions of years, under the influence of gravity, galaxies emerged. And that created the possibility for life to emerge in a corner of the Milky Way.

an accident. This is the unmistakable message of modern science. But our humanity does not lie in our accidental origins, our biological make-up. It lies in that which distinguishes us from all other living things: our rationality, our consciousness, and our capacities as social, purposive creatures to understand, change, and control the world around us.

Modern humanity is unique in possessing consciousness and the capacity for rational choice. This capacity separates us from everything else that we are aware of in the universe. But it is not a result of some divine plan, nor is it the result of our biology; that last has remained unchanged for 50 000 years and more, during which time mankind's capacities have developed beyond all recognition.

Self-made mankind

Instead, human consciousness is a product of our own history, our own development out of the animal kingdom. This has been the result of a social process which we are now in a position to begin to understand, and take control of for the future. Humanity has made itself.

Faith in the human potential, and in our own capacity to make a difference to the world around us, is the only faith we need. Science is not the answer in and of itself. But science allied to a rationally organised social system subject to human control has the potential to transform our lives for the better.

By contrast, faith in God belittles mankind. It places a barrier to rational scientific enquiry. It encourages people to fear experimentation, to have less faith in their own potential.

The current debate about God and the Big Bang raises several important questions. For example, why are the religious mystics now able to influence the public discussion of modern science? And why is contemporary culture so suspicious of scientific advance?

Many scientists are aware that there is a strong non-rational element in contemporary attitudes to science. A Royal Society working party reported on this problem in 1985, and this year has brought the launch of a new journal, *Public Understanding of Science*. In his article, 'How to think about the "anti-science" phenomenon', Gerald Holton poses an interesting question:

'Could it be, at this end of the century, that the widespread lack of a proper understanding of science might itself be either a source, or a tell-tale sign, of a culture's decline?'

The more likely answer is that the lack of understanding of science is a sign

of, rather than a source of, our culture's decline. Contemporary society is stagnant economically, politically and culturally. In such a situation, science fails to live up to its promise, and fails to excite. It can also become prey to the irrational interpretations of the mystics.

The dominant attitudes towards science and religion are always decided by the overall social and intellectual climate of the times, rather than by scientific breakthroughs in and of themselves. For instance, the challenge to established religion during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century did not result narrowly from science. It reflected the wider development of an expanded sense of what was possible through human reason and action. Natural science played only a supporting role in the optimistic movement which dragged society into the modern era. In the nineteenth century, the profusion of social histories on the role of religion and of radical political tracts undermined religious faith more than did science in itself.

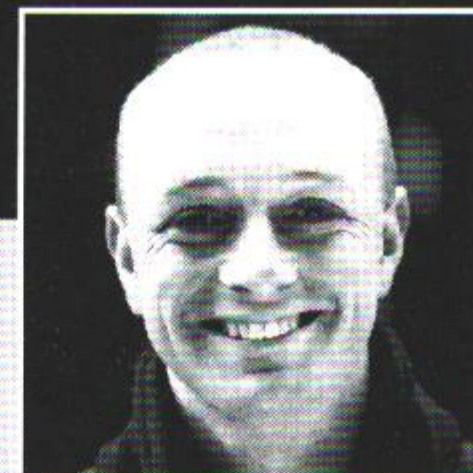
In the same way, we can see current trends in the discussion of God and the Big Bang as a sign of our pessimistic, irrational times rather than a product of scientific discovery.

Faith by default

It is not that contemporary Western society can afford to reject science—any more than Islamic states can reject banking. But science is no longer seen as something beneficial with the potential to change our lives radically. And at a time when society is in decay, but when the old alternatives to the status quo have become discredited, faiths of one sort or another can gain support by default. This trend is being encouraged by conservatives because it is easier to justify the existing social order on the basis of faith than it is on the basis of reason.

What we are witnessing today in the discussion of God and creation is only a revival of faith in a negative sense. The key issue is disenchantment with science and a broader lowering of expectations about the future. This is the reason why a brilliant scientific breakthrough like the discovery of the 'ripples' in the universe has sparked off endless articles about the miracles of God rather than about the wonders of modern science.

The moral of the story is that optimism and enthusiasm for the potential of science can only develop as part of a wider optimism about the future of society. Science can knock some holes in the irrational religious interpretations of the universe. But the ultimate solution will have to be political, not scientific.



Has Springsteen sold out?

As religious ceremonies go it was low-key, but the modesty of the devotees only emphasised their touching devotion. Dozens of men, their suits straining slightly to accommodate the mature figures within, stood quietly in rows, credit card in one hand, two CDs in the other. For today not one, but *two* new Bruce Springsteen albums hit the shops; the first since 1987. The cashiers asked everyone to hold on. 'I've waited five years for this', winked the bloke in front, 'I can wait another five minutes'.

A few bottles of wine and takeaways were consumed around the CD player that night. Out comes the souvenir t-shirt from the open-air Leeds concert. It darkened with sweat under the Yorkshire sun that day, just like Bruce's, but tonight it's clean and ironed specially. Feels a bit tight now—they make everything too small these days. Out with the baseball cap. On with the jeans and trainers. Twenty-four new tracks: 'Man's Job', 'Roll of the Dice', 'Real man'. Nice one, Boss.....Shit! The kids have woken up. Still, summer's coming and this'll sound great in the motor. Sunroof down and the wind blowing through what's left of the hair...

In the seventies Bruce sang a swansong for the innocent days of Spector, Orbison and escape on the road. Ten years later came the chest-beating stadium-packing atrocity, 'Born In The USA', the blue-collar Everyman processed through the *Deerhunter* and splashed over a giant Stars and Stripes. Then came divorce, disillusion, a sad beautiful record nobody bought, remarriage, a baby boy from Patti and now twins from Bruce: 'Human Touch' and 'Lucky Town'. He called 'em that because he felt human and lucky, and Bruce reckons they're just about the best damn records he's ever cut.

In the downtown bars they wouldn't disagree: a new Springsteen single hits the spot like a cold Bud. And the Japs can't get enough of dem rollin' dice and black rivers. Good old Bruce. You either love him or...well, you don't. He's a pretty hard guy to hate, by all accounts. Unless you are a rock critic, that is.

I haven't picked up a rock paper for over a decade, so I was surprised at the level of excitement generated by a middle-aged American inviting a few million close pals to 'get down' in their living rooms. *Melody Maker's* 'Everett True' (is that you, Julie Burchill?) was in a right old state: 'People like Bruce Springsteen are boring music to death', he shrieked, in a piece that took me back to the days of Johnny Rotten.

A healthy case of the 'generation gap'? Well, it's true that Bruce doesn't have much to satisfy the cravings of raging young hormones. The lyrics alternate between hackneyed Americana and maudlin mid-life introspection. The navel-gazing 'loneliness of a long-distance superstar' stuff is best, but even then the outlaw clichés intrude. In one song he's so bored that he shoots up his TV with a .44 Magnum. Soon he's up in court (who reported him—his maid?), and the judge flatteringly calls him 'son', just like he used to say to that young hubcap-swiper Eddie Cochran.

In America the record probably carries a note from the Concerned Parents League saying 'shooting TVs is criminal damage and can be dangerous'. But Bruce doesn't take himself as seriously as some people would have you believe. He knows that as hellraisers go he's in

the Little League, and his domestic troubles 'don't make much for tragedy'. And being a regular guy, he admits to making an honest living as 'a rich man in a poor man's shirt'.

So it's not really surprising that the Everett Trues of this world find him uninspiring. But you have to ask, if it's heroism, radicalism and integrity you're after, why look for it in a rock star in the first place? Why should a Bruce Springsteen record be seen as a betrayal by someone young enough to be The Boss' son? Who raised the poor boy's hopes so cruelly?

The horrible truth dawned on me when I watched a programme called *J'Accuse* presented by Sean O'Hagan. Sean is an ex-rock journalist carving himself a niche as a sort of right-on Bernard Levin—a tireless stater of the obvious who initiates pointless 'debates' about social trends he has 'discovered', such as the short-lived 'New Lad' phenomenon. Watching his intense face blink into the camera, I was reminded of those old soldiers they find in the jungle who haven't heard that the Second World War is over.

For scarcely had Sean set foot back on solid Rock after his life-style jungle ordeal, than his eagle eye spotted that something was amiss. He rallied his pals, a motley band of ageing rock critics hardened by their experiences in the bush. 'Men', he said, 'I'll give it to you

straight. The Rolling Stones have sold out. We must warn everyone immediately'.

Soon he was gravely addressing the nation: 'Audiences who flock to see the Stones today are taking part in an empty ritual based on nostalgia and the cynical manipulation of a myth. The band were once a genuinely subversive force, but they have turned into the antithesis of everything they once stood for.'

'Surely not!' we gasped, enjoying the joke as a procession of 'witnesses' from Sean's gang got to work, covering all the angles for the prosecution. It was all quite funny for the first few minutes, until it became apparent that he was absolutely serious. And that's what you call a sobering thought.

'The Stones have sold out!' How quaint it sounds, like hearing a long-forgotten catchphrase. By my recollection that mournful wail faded out a good 20 years ago, around the time people got bored of saying 'Nice one, Cyril' when the barman dropped a glass. And who stepped into the breach when the Stones went soft? Mr Future of Rock'n'Roll 1975, Bruce Springsteen, that's who. Everett, please, don't tell Sean that *he's* sold out too.

Sean O'Hagan fancies himself as a connoisseur of irony. He appreciates that there is an inherent contradiction in rich old men playing poor-boy music. But there are other ironies too. Like a thirtysomething journalist with the mind of a snotty 14-year old who's just discovered sarcasm. Little Sean just has to keep telling the grown-ups about their hollow lives. Look, there's a bloke in a *suit* buying a *blues* album! And that guy in the bootlace tie with the death's head clip; if only he was aware of the pathos...

Deconstruction, symbols, cultural icons, meaning....The masses in thrall to the mesmeric bogus subversiveness of Mick Jagger....Must tell the world....Struggle for a new politics of rock....

'Rock'n'roll is the sigh of the soul in a soulless world', wrote Marx. The point is not to waste your life trying to interpret rock'n'roll or to change it. Surely our kids deserve a better future than that. ●

If it's heroism and radicalism you're after, why look for it in a rock star?

'There ought to be

There probably is, says John Fitzpatrick, and if there isn't, there soon will be

There it was again, on the front page: 'Union chiefs, furious about the sackings, said writs could fly.' *Writs!* Not a strike, a go-slow, an occupation, hardly even a protest. Just 'you'll be hearing from our solicitor'.

If anybody has a problem these days, from women with porn to the home office with joy-riders, the reflex is automatic. Let's use the law, preferably a new one, to sort it. The left, for example, wants a new Representation of the People Act and a Bill of Rights to overcome its political impotence.

The government has a vested interest in having the law at centre stage. The more the institutions of the state are seen as the appropriate forums for the resolution of people's disputes and grievances, the greater is its control over the terms on which any resolution is made. The more the state can be projected as the defender of individual rights, the greater is its authority as the arbiter of the nature and extent of those rights, and as the enforcer of the limits it imposes on them.

Little wonder that one area of public expenditure in recent years which has positively rocketed is that of legal aid (even if Lord Mackay is cutting it now). Ensuring a certain level of access to the law is a constant imperative for the state.

Whether you utilise the machinery of the law, personally or collectively, is a tactical matter, informed by a high degree of pragmatism. If, for example, you want to limit the damage of libellous statements against you, you may be well advised to sue. A culture is developing, however, in which people are making a virtue out of necessity. Increasingly, the

law is no longer seen as an occasional expedient but as a strategic route to both individual betterment and social change.

Instead of asking what activity we can undertake ourselves to achieve our ends directly, we ask a legal body to do it for us. For example, even 10 years ago, if a local authority changed its policy to make it harder for women suffering domestic violence to be rehoused, the local response would have certainly included some form of political pressure on the council. Women's groups, the local left, trade unions even would have joined in some form of direct action by way of protest. Who knows they may even have staged a 'sit-in', a quaint term from the past. Today the same people would probably turn immediately to judicial review.

This further weakens our confidence, not only in our ability to achieve things ourselves, but even in our own judgment as to what is right and just for us. It doesn't work either. They don't deliver the law we need. The Commons may pass cosmetic anti-pollution laws to show us they have all our best interests at heart; the judges may rebuke a minister to show how independent and citizen-friendly they are. The truth is that, encouraged by the widespread consent given to the rule of law, they pass and enforce the laws which they want.

Recently, the state's growing need to emphasise law and order, and scapegoat as many people as possible, has led to a torrent of legislation. Any slightly deviant behaviour is immediately criminalised, often irrespective of the existence of perfectly adequate statute law. We can now see that over the past decade the state has not only success-

fully moved into place a comprehensive battery of repressive powers and procedures, it has become bolder and more experimental by the year.

Forget the blockbusters like the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Public Order Act 1986, which substantially extended police powers and restricted freedoms. The latter also set a trend in targeting football hooligans, nomadic hippies and racists. Forget too all the laws which make effective trade unionism impossible within the law. Forget the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 and the gagging laws like the Contempt of Court Act 1981 and the Official Secrets Act 1989.

These days the state gets even more intimately involved. The Surrogacy Arrangements Act 1985, the Human Organs Transplant Act 1989 and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 all mark further interference in people's private lives. And if you like having your scrotum pierced, you can now expect the judiciary to stop your fun.

The government appears to have hit every panic with at least two criminalising statutes: the Football Spectators Act 1989, the Football (Offences) Act 1991, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1989, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, the Breeding of Dogs Act 1991, the Badgers Act 1991, the Badgers (Further Protection) Act 1991, the Protection of Animals (Amendment) Act 1988, the Protection against Cruel Tethering Act 1988, the Protection of Children (Tobacco) Act 1986, Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) Act 1991.

Hooligans, children and animals are

a law against it'

standard fare. Sometimes only a new crime will do: the Taking of Hostages Act 1982, the Video Recordings Act 1984, the Crossbows Act 1987, the Malicious Communications Act 1989, the Computer Misuse Act 1990, the War Crimes Act 1991 and so on. Kenneth Baker promised Aggravated Vehicle Taking (joy-riding) laws, and no doubt his plans to criminalise squatters will be implemented by his successors. A particularly nasty example is the Child Support Act 1991 (absent fathers' maintenance payments) which is directed at developing the idea of the undeserving underclass. Or of course Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which promoted anti-homosexual prejudice.

The *Daily Telegraph* at least complained about new powers of search and entry, and the tendency of new criminal legislation to adopt a presumption of guilt. In the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1985, 'If, in any proceedings for an offence, there is evidence from which it could reasonably be concluded that the accused was digging for a badger, he shall be presumed to have been digging for a badger unless the contrary was shown.' Similar presumptions are to be found in the Football (Offences) Act 1991 (walking on the grass: guilty until proved innocent). The Royal Commission on Criminal Justice may well restrict the suspect's right to silence.

Unfortunately, there has been far too little resistance. Indeed many of these measures have been welcomed by a law-happy culture. Too much state power? Not enough, say some supporters of the Public Order Act. No doubt parliament will promptly oblige. If you keep asking, they'll keep passing them. ●

What did the establishment see in a homosexual artist who painted deformations? Alan Harding on the appeal of Francis Bacon

Life and death



Study after Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, 1953

The day after Francis Bacon died, Lord Gowrie, former Conservative arts minister, said that until yesterday he was the greatest living artist. It is debatable whether he was the greatest—if you have the time to waste on the discussion—but he was certainly the most expensive. So expensive that Bacon came to rehash his earliest and most celebrated paintings so that he could donate them to the public galleries which could not afford the real thing.

It is intriguing that a roguish homosexual who painted grotesque parodies should be so celebrated by the establishment. There are exceptions of course. Margaret Thatcher referred to Bacon as that man who painted those disgusting pictures. But Thatcher would be off the scale if it were possible to measure philistinism.

The honour afforded Bacon probably had three causes. The most simple is that he was British (Anglo-Irish to be exact) and therefore gave the old country a place in the artistic first division. Second, Bacon appeared to challenge the professionalisation of the modern

artist. Part of his appeal lay in the fact that he was an exciting and gifted amateur. Bacon worked against the grain of an academic world that got up everybody's noses because of its self-righteousness. Finally, Bacon is supposed to have had something profound to say about the human condition.

Bacon came to painting by accident. When asked if he had always wanted to be a painter, he replied: 'No, I expected to have to earn a living.' The fact that Bacon enjoyed gambling and drinking champagne in considerable quantities is neither here nor there. The issue is Bacon's aesthetic: 'I think that painting today is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down.' In Bacon's work the artist engages with chance and sometimes it comes off: 'the transforming effect of cultivated accidents of paint' or 'the mysterious struggle with chance'.

Bacon's favoured method of painting—on stretched, unprimed canvass and across the weave to get the rawness—was itself the result of an accident. Out of money in the south of France in the winter

of 1947-48, he started painting on the back of his own canvasses and an image for the twentieth century was born.

The technique favoured the attack and passion which are the characteristic features of Bacon's best work. But Bacon has a limited amount to say, despite his reputation as a commentator on the human condition. 'You live and you die', observed Bacon, 'and that's it, don't you think?'. This is a rather narrow picture of the human condition and its possibilities. It is the outlook of a man detached from the life of society, pleased enough with his own good fortune but involved only privately in the world outside.

Bacon's great achievement was his rendition of private grief. His work says that human beings suffer, and since most of his human forms are alone, that we suffer alone. Bacon's best subject is the single human form, incongruously trapped in space, colour and memory—a friend, a lover or himself.

We do not have to celebrate this subjectivity as the representation of all human life to recognise that Bacon captured with an astonishing intensity one element of our lives. ●



The Superior Intelligence show

The front cover of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* is decorated with a picture—not of a black hole or an electron but of Stephen Hawking, in his wheelchair, smiling down (benignly) at the reader like a God. Or, more precisely, like the Mekon.

The idea of a damaged body housing a massive brain is a central trope of space opera. Davros, the leathery little leader of the Daleks is one example. And on *Star Trek* once I remember a frail creature with a hydrocephalic head and a miniature body riding round in a hi-tech washing basket preaching peace and love.

Hawking does not look like a genius. He looks like our idea of a superior being. He even has the synthesised voice of a Dalek. Which is appropriate because Hawking's project is one of Dalek-like grandeur. It is 'the triumph of human reason' which he defines rather perversely as 'to know the mind of God'. This is Hawking's Big Claim. The Big Claim is every bit as important as the Big Bang.

Science has been tough on humanity's ego. Copernicus moved us from the centre of the solar system to the margin, and ever since then the margin has got wider and wider until science itself seemed to become hesitant. What could a little being stuck on the outer spiral of an ordinary galaxy really see of the universe? Chaos theory and quantum mechanics are in a sense admissions of defeat, elaborate 'don't knows' calling into question the whole idea of knowledge. There is no such hesitancy in Hawking's universe.

His book is an attempt to marry up the general theory of relativity with quantum mechanics—two things thought to be irreconcilable. The geography of his ideas is biblical. He talks about the Beginning (Big Bang), and the End (Big Crunch). Although he argues that time is imaginary—a way of perceiving space—what people remember about him is the way he seems to have given the cosmos a story. For instance, a scientific account of the universe should preclude the need for a creator, but the way Hawking talks about the Big Bang makes it sound like the moment of Creation, as though—like Bishop Usher—he could put a date on when God said 'Let there be light'.

It is thrilling stuff and Errol Morris' television documentary *A Brief History of Time* (Channel 4) got the excitement across. Where philosophy has become bogged down in a debate about linguistics, Hawking seems to slough off language itself. His ideas are metaphoric and pictorial because tenses are not illuminating when you are dealing with 'before time'. When Hawking talks about the shape of time it sounds not like a new idea but like a new way of thought, the Superior Intelligence.

Then there is Hawking the slayer of dragons. Before Hawking, the black hole was a kind of worrying hiatus in creation—a gap leading to

some hideous parallel world, or worse, the Beginning of the End itself. Hawking proved that black holes leaked radiation just like you do and that their 'event horizon' gets smaller rather than larger. Black holes are finite. The Superior Intelligence is benign and comforting.

But it is also human. The Channel 4 documentary wove Hawking's biography into its account of his theories. Of course, this is no ordinary biography. The professor is at pains to point out that he was born on the anniversary of Galileo's death and that he now has Newton's old job. Channel 4 added the war (and pointed out that the blackout offered wonderful opportunities for the young astronomer). There are the human touches too—the boozy undergraduate years, the tragic illness, etc.

Flicking between the theories and the life dramatised the basic thrust of Hawking's grand project. It gave an anecdotal tone to the science.

Hawking talks about what would happen to you in a black hole as though he had been there and done that, as though he had straddled space and time. It is the reversal of Copernicus. The restoration of man (Hawking) to the centre. Nowhere in the Channel 4 film did anyone question the Triumph of Human Reason. Instead it was offered as revelation. At one point Roger Penrose was accused of having doubted; he visibly squirmed

and then repented. The film was divided—like the Bible—into chapters, and each chapter was dated so that we could watch the March of Time Towards Truth.

But as the film progressed, an odd thing happened when the hagiography started actually to undermine the science. It's true that Hawking's own highly visual way of thinking is appropriate and illuminating, but the film went out of its way to point to its roots not in science but in disability.

Hawking finds it hard to write and speak; a picture is easier to construct. When Hawking explained that the 'direction' of time was indicated by the 'increase of chaos in the system' we saw first a broken cup and then the professor's broken body. This was poignant. But when he went on to talk about the possibility that time might be reversed at the Big Crunch we were shown the same images in a way that seemed to be inviting us to think...*well he would say that wouldn't he*. If you had motor neurone disease you'd want time to go backwards too.

Hawking has dedicated his career to reviving the grand project of science and the idea of a truth that is objective and complete. Without ever engaging with the science directly, Errol Morris got the Superior Intelligence to collude in the trashing of his own life's work. Hawking may think he was saying that science is the triumph of reason. In fact, what he said was that science is a compensatory delusion. ●

Hawking's project is one of Dalek-like grandeur

If you want to read something like this

at least once a month:

Die deutsche Revolution hat die schon nicht mehr erhoffte Gelegenheit geschaffen, die fünfundvierzig qualvolle Jahre lang nur zwischengelagerte deutsche Geschichte der finalen Entsorgung zuzuführen. Die Täter zweier Weltkriege und eines unvergleichlichen Genozids konnten sich plötzlich als Opfer der Geschichte entdecken, als Opfer von Leuten gar, die zuvor als ihre Opfer gegolten hatten. Im Zuge der revolutionären Umwertung aller Werte stellte sich nämlich heraus, daß diese Opfer der Deutschen später zu Tätern an Deutschen geworden waren. Bedeutete dies nicht, daß sie schon zur Zeit ihrer Verfolgung nicht etwa als schuldlose Opfer, sondern als künftige Täter in Vorbeugehaft genommen bzw. der Vorbeugeexekution zugeführt worden waren? Wenn man annehmen darf, daß aus Thälmann ein Honecker hätte werden können — ist es da, bei aller berechtigten Kritik an den juristischen Formalitäten, nicht irgendwie von höherer Gerechtigkeit und ein Segen obendrein, daß er das KZ Buchenwald nicht überlebt hat?

Wie tief die erfreuliche Nachricht, daß wir, die Deutschen und die Brüder und Schwestern der Deutschen, denen undeutsche Gewaltherrscher vierzig Jahre ihres Lebens gestohlen haben, die eigentlichen Opfer der jüngeren Geschichte seien, die Psychen erlöst hat, mag man an Landsleuten ablesen, die sich vor ein paar Jahren stolz Sozialisten genannt haben und nun Wiedergutmachung für die Hinterbliebenen von Gestapo- und SS-Führern fordern, die in Internierungslagern der Roten Armee an Hunger und Seuchen gestorben sind. Doch auch ganz andere, Leute von Anstand, die Klügeres als ich über die deutschen Verbrechen gesagt haben und noch vor einem Jahr ganz bei Sinnen waren, können heute über die Legitimität der Verurteilung von Grenzsoldaten der DDR durch die BRD-Justiz nicht mehr diskutieren, ohne die Frage aufzuwerfen, ob die Verurteilung und Hinrichtung des Auschwitz-Kommandanten Höß durch die Alliierten etwa nicht legitim gewesen sei. Jeder Tote ist ein Toter zuviel, wie wahr, und man soll nicht aufrechnen, gewiß — aber wie muß eine Moral beschaffen sein, der es wirklich keinen Unterschied mehr macht, ob an

der DDR-Grenze 6.000.000 Menschen vergast oder in den Vernichtungslagern der Nazis 200 Flüchtlinge erschossen worden sind?

Was in 43 Jahren nicht gelingen wollte, ist in weniger als zwei Jahren danach gelungen: die Deutschen endgültig und schmerzlos von der Verantwortung für ihre Geschichte und damit zugleich von den letzten Spuren einer Scham zu befreien, die ein wenig Zurückhaltung gebot beim Griff nach Weltmacht bzw., wie das im neueren Jargon heißt: »den historischen Möglichkeiten deutscher Politik« (A.Vollmer). Welche das sein könnten, hat des Landes beliebtester Talkshow-Historiker, Arnulf Baring von der FU Berlin, kürzlich auf jenem Platz in Springers »Welt« erläutert, auf dem ein hauptberufliches Stasiopfer kurz zuvor über ein vom MfS angerichtetes »Auschwitz in den Seelen« geklagt hatte. Nachdem der Herr Professor ganz ungerührt dargelegt hat, daß in Osteuropa nun keineswegs »kompromißbereite Demokraten, sondern rabiate Nationalisten, gewalttätige Faschisten, verbohnte Antisemiten: alle möglichen Kräfte der Gewalt und des Hasses« die Macht ergriffen und »unsere neuen Gegner möglicherweise viel rabiatere als der Spätstalinismus« seien, kommt er zu dem Schluß:

Gerade auf dem Gebiet der Sicherheit ist die europäische Solidarität nicht sehr stark entwickelt... Es wird wichtig sein, sich an solche Grundeinstellungen (Frankreichs und Großbritanniens) zu erinnern, wenn in drei Jahren der Atomsperrvertrag ausläuft. Wir werden uns darüber klarwerden müssen, welchen Schutz uns der westliche Zusammenhalt fortan bietet und welche praktischen Schlußfolgerungen für unsere eigene zukünftige Politik aus einer realistischen Lageeinschätzung zu ziehen sind.

Atomwaffen für Deutschland — welche andere historische Möglichkeit bliebe einer so herrlich wiedergutmachten, der Verteidigung von Zivilisation und Besenreinheit verpflichteten Weltmacht, die Nationalisten und Faschisten Osteuropas zur Vernunft zu bringen? Vielleicht, Herr Professor, bekommen die Deutschen ja die Chance, ihr weltgeschichtliches Konto mit einem Schlag auf verbohnte russische Antisemiten atomar auszugleichen.

(Extract from Hermann L. Gremliza's leader »Wilhelm der Allererste«, KONKRET 3/92)

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MARXIST

REVIEW OF BOOKS

How has China managed to survive the global collapse of Stalinism? Mark Wu offers an alternative view of the nature of the Chinese revolution and of the Chinese Communist Party

China: revolution and reform

Books discussed in this article include:

Chinese Village, Socialist State, Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz and Mark Selden, Yale University Press, £25 hbk

The Nationalist Era in China 1927-49, Lloyd Eastman, Jerome Ch'en, Suzanne Pepper, Lyman P Van Slyke, Cambridge University Press, £35 hbk, £12.95 pbk

One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong under Reform, Ezra F Vogel, Harvard University Press, £27.95 hbk, £10.25 pbk

Investing in China: Ten Years of the Open Door Policy, Richard Pomfret, Harvester Wheatsheaf, £40 hbk

China in the Nineties: Crisis Management and Beyond, David Goodman and Gerald Segal (eds), Clarendon Press, £30 hbk, £11.95 pbk

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the question being asked is how much longer can the Chinese Communist Party last? The survival of the CCP is often attributed to its repressive nature, an impression reinforced by the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. But repression alone tells us little about how the Chinese party has managed to hold on to power.

Before the death of Mao, books on China were often little more than lyrical accounts of the joys of Chinese peasant life. Nowadays, Chinese studies tend to be based on more rigorous field research and the study of documents which have become accessible since the end of the cultural revolution and the beginning of the reform era in 1978. The result has been a large number of books which allow a much clearer assessment of China and its leading party. Recent volumes of the Cambridge History of China, from which *The Nationalist Era in China 1927-49* is taken, have summarised much of this research.

Chinese Village, Socialist State is one of the most important books on China to have appeared in recent years. It provides a compelling refutation of the commonplace notion that the Chinese revolution which put Mao's communists in power in 1949 was a peasant revolution. The book is the product of a decade's field research by three American academics in Raoyang county, a small

group of villages in Hebei province, 120 miles south of Beijing. The time span covers the period from 1937, through the land reform of the 1940s, agricultural collectivisation, the Great Leap Forward (1957-60) and the famine that followed. It is an extraordinary work, a unique synthesis of oral history and recorded data on what happened in one small area in this key period of Chinese history. Even for those who never had any illusions in the CCP, it is still a shocking story, a record of total failure.

There is no doubt that the CCP was genuine in its initial attempts to liberate the peasantry. But it had nothing tangible to offer the deeply conservative peasants, for whom every change was regarded with great suspicion. Ironically, the one factor that could have shown the peasants the benefits of collectivisation—mechanisation—was rejected by the CCP, which still has no solution to the problem of surplus labour.

The CCP relied on a mixture of coercion and anti-Japanese nationalism to persuade the peasants to accept changes, changes which were often brutal. For example in 1948, CCP officials directed local officials in areas under their control to implement a new land reform policy. Households were classified on the basis of how much land each had owned in 1936, before land reform began: 'For the rest of their lives individuals would bear the class ►

labels fixed at this time, labels based on politicized assessments of one's household position in 1936....The majority, those classified as middle peasants floated in a political limbo, sometimes linked to class enemies, sometimes located in the ranks of the good people. The supposedly scientific analysis of class was actually fraught with the subjective and the political. By freezing life in a single frame, fate was sealed in perpetuity. A caste-like system, not liberating equality, resulted from class-struggle land reform.' (p101)

Changes were often arbitrary and dependent on the whims of a village leader. In this area of China there were no landlords and nearly all peasants owned the land they cultivated. So in one village, 'a little orphan girl, Song Duo, was pre-emptively made a landlord because of the political pressure to struggle against class enemies. That is, the village leaders decided that when Song Duo grew up she would be formally labelled a landlord and for the rest of her life be treated as an enemy of the people' (p106). Because the official culture was so alienating, peasant traditions and superstitions grew stronger even as they became invisible.

As the fifties progressed and agriculture became more collectivised, agricultural production figures lost all contact with reality. The only way to guarantee preferential access to state funds was for village leaders to maintain the fiction of record production. Close planting of crops was encouraged as proof that plants too could cooperate and therefore prosper; they didn't. Pondering the prospect of fictitious massive grain surpluses, Mao urged a 'three-

it possible to reconstruct its early history and to reassess the nature of the Chinese revolution (see for example, Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, and Michael Y Luk, *The Origins of Chinese Bolshevism: an Ideology in the Making 1920-28*).

Marxism was imported into China from the Soviet Union, complete with advisers, financial resources and a method of organisation. Recent research has shown how dependent the CCP was on the Soviet-led international movement, the Comintern, for political direction as well as technical assistance. The party was founded by the Comintern delegation, which chose Chen Duxiu, the Dean of Beijing University, for the job. Chen Duxiu was chosen for his influence among Beijing students and not for his organisational skills or knowledge of Marxism. Indeed, a couple of months before founding the party, he was advocating the adoption of Christianity in China as a solution to the country's ills.

The CCP has the unenviable distinction of not having a single Marxist among its founder members. It's hardly surprising that party life in the 1920s was pretty basic. There was a ramshackle organisation, problems of language between members from different parts of the country and virtually no political literature available in Chinese. The Chinese Communist Party never produced a single pamphlet of worthwhile Marxist literature.

In the absence of a social democratic party, the CCP provided an obvious focus for the new Chinese intelligentsia, who were acutely aware of the desperate plight into which China had been plunged. They were impressed by the Bolshevik Revolution and outraged at Western attempts to overthrow it; but while a revolution to liberate workers and peasants was easy enough to support, the idea of a revolution led by the working class was a lot more difficult to accept.

It is scarcely surprising that the party's initial attempts to organise the newly emerging Chinese working class were hesitant. It was not until it joined the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), under Comintern direction, in 1923 that the party got the patriotic platform with which it felt more at home. The CCP's successes and failures in different parts of China as the radical, cutting edge of the Guomindang were entirely predicated upon the degree of tolerance that it was accorded by the Guomindang and the local warlords. Having used the CCP in the northern expedition to reunite China, Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-shek wasted no time in disposing of its cadre in a bloody massacre on the streets of Shanghai in 1927.

The CCP's theoretical and organisational immaturity was cruelly exposed. Jerome Ch'en describes its search for a new strategy in his essay in *The Nationalist Era in China*. What is striking about the discussions he details is how wooden they were even at this desperate stage, as the CCP searched for a scapegoat and then tried to rebuild the party. Thus began the tradition of selecting an individual or small group to take the blame for a failure of policy,

Peasants began to starve as record grain harvests were announced

thirds system': 'Planting one third is enough; another third may be turned into grass or forests; let the remaining third be fallow. The whole country will thus become a big garden.' (Quoted in *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p222)

In response to reports of ever-increasing yields, more and more land was taken out of production. Peasants began to starve as record grain harvests were announced. Although even Mao was now sceptical of inflated claims, nobody dared speak out: 'Anyone who did point to economic irrationality, decline, disaster and hunger would be accused of throwing cold water on the enthusiasm of the masses....The sound of politics had the ring of death. The countryside fell silent.' (p230) In the famine that followed, 20m to 30m Chinese peasants died.

After reading this book nobody could believe that there could ever be such a thing as a popular peasant revolution. So why was the CCP engaged in this futile task in the first place? For the answer to this question we have to look at the origins of the CCP. Recent research makes

allowing the party as a whole to avoid responsibility, which continues to the present day.

In the orthodox Marxist interpretation, 1927 marks a decisive change in the CCP from a working class to a peasant party. Ch'en points out that the CCP centre in Shanghai was discovered and destroyed no fewer than 14 times. By 1931, when the party centre was moved out of the city, 'no less than 24 000 members of the CCP were

The CCP's orientation to the working class was always more formal than real

either arrested or killed and 30 000 others had to go through the process of confession to the KMT [Guomindang]' (p103). In such circumstances it made sense for what remained of the CCP to move its main organisation from the city to the countryside.

It is certainly true that the party's proletarian base was removed by the events of 1927, but the nature of a political party cannot be deduced merely from changes in the social composition of its membership lists. The CCP's orientation to the working class was always more formal than real. The CCP had tried to organise the peasantry as well as workers before 1927, but with less success (see for example, Roy Hofheinz, *The Broken Wave: The Chinese Communist Peasant Movement 1922-28*). After 1927, this ratio of successes was reversed.

Harold Isaacs misses the point completely in his celebrated Trotskyist polemic, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, which portrays the CCP as a group of hardened Bolsheviks only days away from seizing state power in 1927, only to be inexplicably led astray by messages from Stalin. The real tragedy of the 1927 events is that while the objective conditions for a working class revolution were present at that time, the CCP was never the organisation that could direct it. The important change in the CCP is that from this date the party had an independent army which guaranteed its survival.

Along with the CCP, other left factions were expelled from the Guomindang, and the popular support which it had enjoyed was slowly dissipated. Many left wingers have labelled the Guomindang as the party of the Chinese bourgeoisie. Lloyd Eastman, probably the most reliable authority on the Guomindang, concludes that 'to baldly ascribe a class character to the Nationalist regime, without noting its important differences with the landlords and the capitalists, conceals its fundamental nature. For the regime was dependent first of all on the military. From that fact all else followed. It was not in any basic way accountable to this or that social-economic class or indeed to any forces outside itself' (*The Nationalist Era in China*, p26).

With its contracting social base, the Guomindang regime degenerated into a military dictatorship. The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 gave it the chance to recover some of its legitimacy. Both the Guomindang and the CCP posed as defenders of China against the aggressor, but Chiang Kai-shek was more interested in finishing off the CCP. As Eastman points out, the CCP's platform 'matched the mood of urban China—of students, intellectuals, large sections of the bourgeoisie, and many workers—far better than the Guomindang's repressive call "for unification before resistance"' (*The Nationalist Era in China*, p177).

When it functioned as a recruiting agent for the People's Liberation Army, the ideological limitations of the CCP were of little consequence. But the victory of 1949, which liberated China from imperialism, marks the limits of any progressive role for the CCP. Mao was explicit in stating that it was not possible to eliminate capitalism and realise socialism 'at an early date' as this did not fit with China's 'national condition'.

If China had not been forced into isolation by the USA, its development after 1949 would probably have been along the same kind of lines as it has followed in the current era of pro-market reforms. As it was, the CCP was forced inwards, back on to its own voluntarist beliefs which had sustained it through the Long March to final victory. This externally imposed isolation explains why the reform era which began in 1978 was so long in coming: a theoretical justification for most of the reform measures can be seen in CCP documents of the 1950s and 1960s (see C Howe & KR Walker, *Foundations of the Chinese Planned Economy: A Documentary Survey 1953-65*).

When Deng Xiaoping initiated the reforms at the end of 1978, Guangdong province in southern China was given special permission to move ahead more rapidly than other regions of China. The province was given a large degree of financial independence from Beijing to determine wages, set prices, engage in foreign trade, invest and set up special economic zones as laboratories where capitalism could be relearned from Hong Kong.

The progress of these reforms is described in *One Step Ahead in China*. Ezra Vogel's choice of Guangdong, with its strong connections with Hong Kong, means that the reforms are presented in the best possible light. Only Fujian province, which has links with Taiwan, could present such a favourable picture. But even in Shenzhen, Guangdong's famous special economic zone, the record is mixed. In fact, the importance of Shenzhen, described as 'Deng Xiaoping's high cadre university', is as much symbolic as real: it has been a showpiece for potential foreign investors, and a physical source of reassurance for Hong Kong capitalists worried about 1997.

For other provinces, with no connections with overseas Chinese capitalists, the reforms make much less sense. And even in Guangdong, the reforms have not ►

been a runaway success. By stopping his account in 1988, Vogel is able to avoid discussion of many of the problems, such as unemployment and homelessness, which have exploded in the past few years. For example, over China's new year holiday of 1989, two million desperate people entered Guangdong in search of jobs. The province is fast coming to resemble a backward capitalist country with extremes of wealth and poverty.

In *Investing in China: Ten Years of the Open Door Policy*, Richard Pomfret shows just how much the reforms have favoured Guangdong. In the first decade of reform, 58 per cent of direct foreign investment has gone into Guangdong, far surpassing its nearest rivals—Beijing (12 per cent), Shanghai (seven per cent) and Fujian province (six per cent). Even worse, the 17 inland provinces have 'probably accounted for \$350m actual DFI [direct foreign investment] up to the end of 1987, about six per cent of the total' (p95).

Pomfret is more careful than most commentators to distinguish between promised and actual investment; a distinction which the Chinese government is keen to blur. Thus, in the inland provinces only about 11 per cent of the announced investment materialised. Like Vogel,

been affected by the events of 1989.

The editors suggest that during the 1980s there were two broad strands of thought on how best to reform China. 'One was of a market-determined economy with an institutionalised and relatively open political system, though still ruled by a communist party. The other was of a market-oriented economy, with considerably less political liberalisation...where the communist party and the state still dominated the economy and society.' (p2) Although it is probably more accurate to speak of a spectrum of views, this division still makes more sense than the usual one of 'reformers' and 'hardliners' so beloved of Western journalists.

In her essay, Anita Chan looks at who has gained and who has lost from the reforms. If you ask Chinese people, particularly students, who they think has benefited most from the reforms they often single out private households such as taxi drivers, workers in collectives or peasants, three social groups which were widely despised in Chinese urban society in the Maoist era. Chan shows that this view is wrong. For example, the average net income of a peasant in 1988 was a third that of the average city dweller. It is debatable how much better off the average peasant is after 10 years of reform. There is a flourishing rich peasant economy, but it is largely confined to areas around cities where peasants have ready access to urban markets.

Chan points out that intellectuals have done relatively well out of the reforms, although 'their chorus of complaints that workers and peasants were making more money than themselves has been loud and aggressive' (p111). This has worked to the government's advantage: 'indeed, if one sifts carefully through the writings of Chinese intellectuals of all persuasions of the past several years, one is hard pressed to find any mention of working class grievances' (p111). One of the most depressing aspects of the student protests of 1989 was the contempt the student leaders had for the Chinese working class.

What Chan calls the new moneyed elite are the true winners in the reform process: 'They comprised the \$10 000 households, the owners of private enterprises, the lessee-managers of state and collective enterprises, and lastly [CCP] officials and their offspring who were and are raking in large sums by privately serving as middlemen in commodity sales.' (p115)

Earlier this year, Deng Xiaoping toured Guangdong and Shenzhen calling for the pace of economic change to be stepped up—a shift which can only mean more unemployment and poverty for millions of Chinese workers. Sooner or later along the reform road, the CCP will have to break the 'iron rice bowl' that feeds the masses, bringing it into direct conflict with the Chinese working class. Far from representing a throwback to the communist past, the Tiananmen Square massacre could well turn out to be a sign of things to come as China is violently transformed into a capitalist economy.

Sooner or later along the reform road, the CCP will have to break the 'iron rice bowl' that feeds the masses

Pomfret's book finishes in 1988; but where Vogel's cut-off point was dictated by the period of his field research, Pomfret's book is based primarily on published statistics. It's hard to escape the conclusion that his choice of 1988 was deliberate, as it allows him to avoid any discussion of the major economic and social problems that have occurred since.

A more balanced appraisal of the reforms is provided by *China in the Nineties: Crisis Management and Beyond*, a collection of essays edited by David Goodman and Gerald Segal, written after the crushing of the student democracy protests. How much difference to the reforms did the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre make? It is clear from this book that, while Western commentators and politicians loudly condemned the massacre as a return to 'hardline communism', the Chinese bureaucracy has remained committed to pro-market reform—and the international capitalist fraternity has been conducting business as usual with Beijing.

Goodman and Segal point out that foreign economic relationships remain the cornerstone of China's development strategy. There has been no attempt at recollectivisation of agriculture; and wage reform to encourage differentials and remove job security has not

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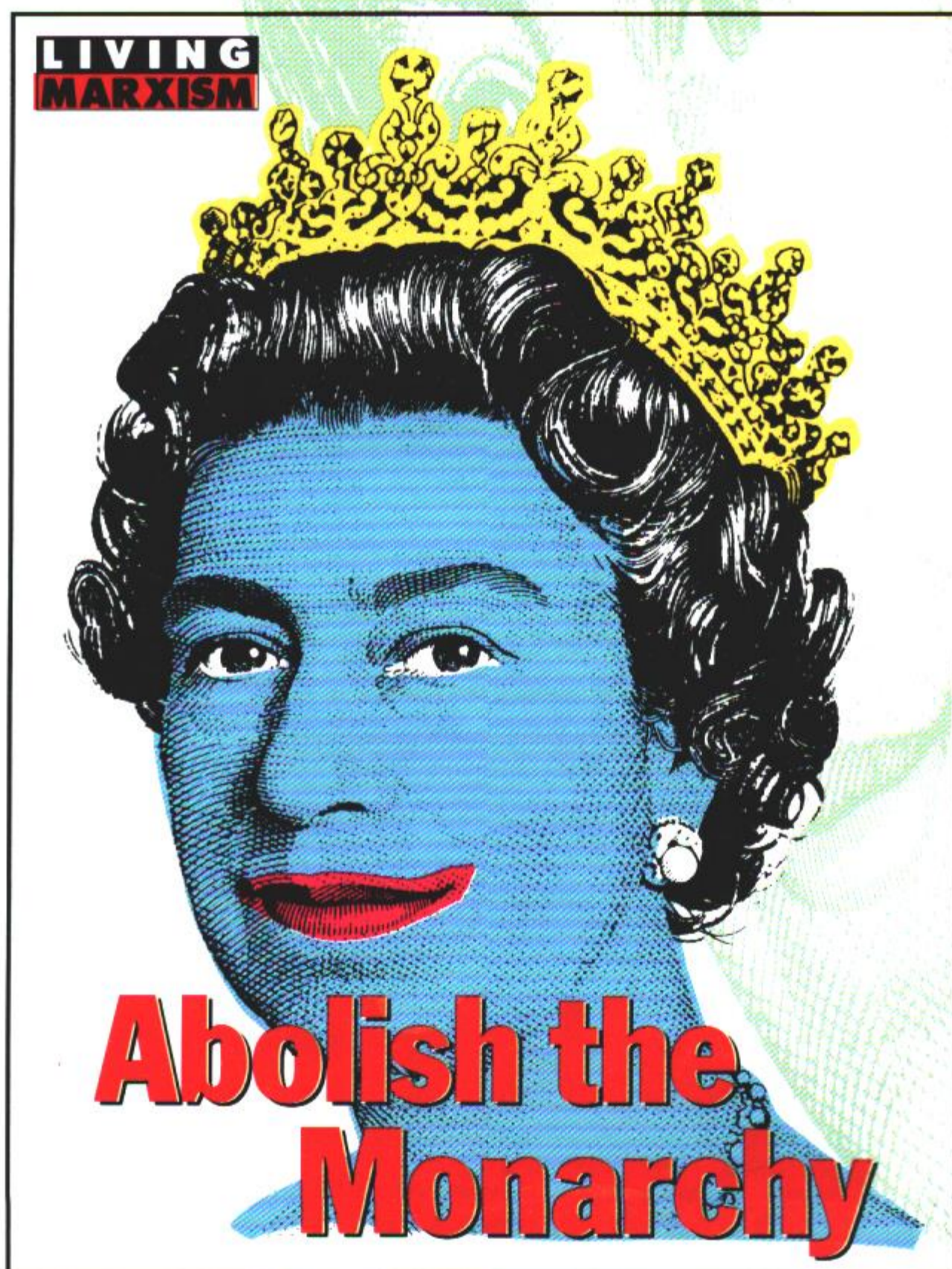
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