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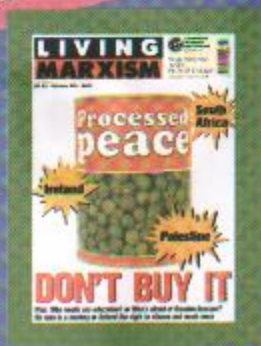
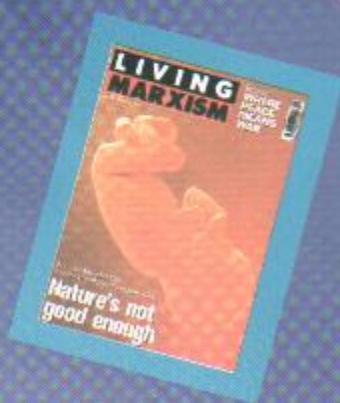
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than the Tories

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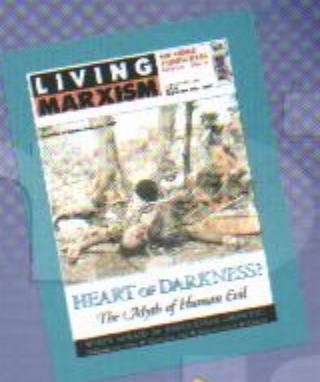
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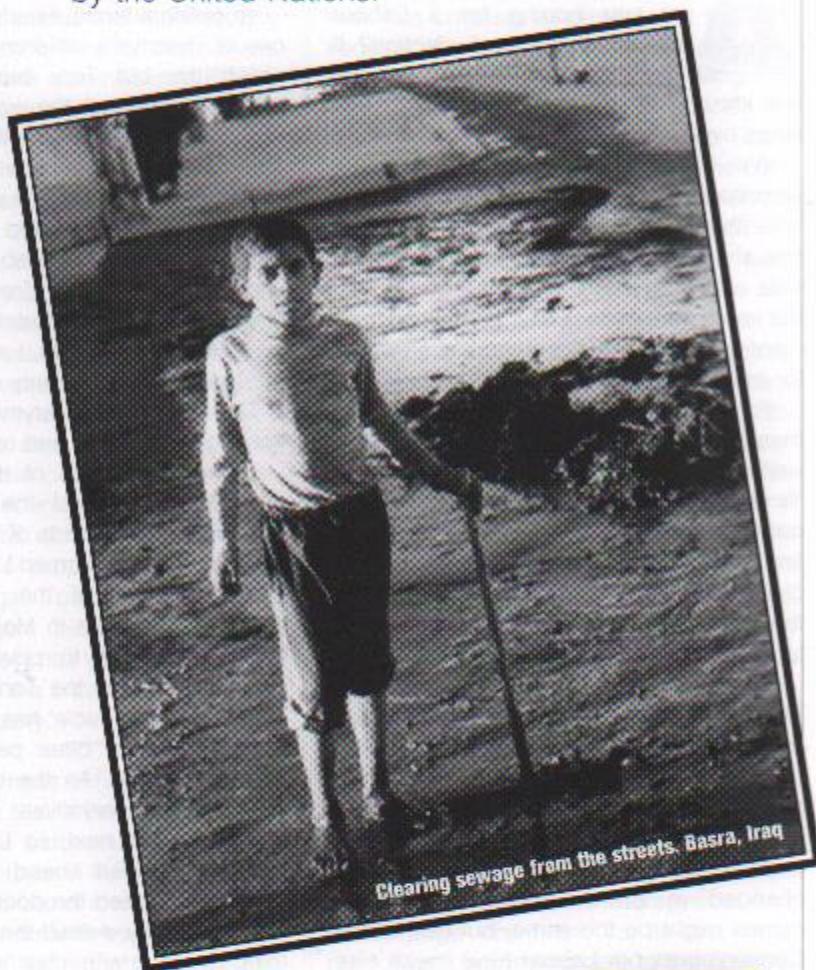
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The UN: new dictators of Iraq

Hugh Livingstone and Kayode Olafimihan report from inside Iraq, centre pages:

'Infant mortality rates have risen nearly sevenfold in four years. "Dehydration due to diarrhoea is the biggest killer of children in Iraq; pneumonia is the second biggest killer of children" according to Unicef. In fact the biggest killer of Iraqi children is the sanctions imposed by the United Nations.'



Clearing sewage from the streets. Basra, Iraq

Editor: **Mick Hume**

International: **Daniel Nassim** ● News: **Andrew Calcutt** ● Living: **Kenan Malik**

Books: **James Heartfield** ● Production manager: **Sally Gray** ● Production: **Michael Kramer, Peter Ray, Alec Campbell** ● Managing Editor: **Phil Murphy**

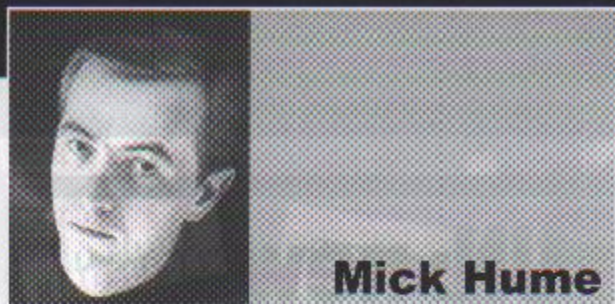
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Mick Hume

Labour would be even worse

Are you hoping for a Labour victory at the next election? If your wish comes true, you will not know what hit you when Tony Blair takes over.

We would all be happy to see the verminous Tories humiliated at the polls after they have ruined so many lives. But that should not blind anybody to the other side of the equation. The likelihood is that the immediate impact of a Labour government would be to make matters even worse for many of us.

For a start, a Blair administration would mean more enthusiastic assaults on the welfare state; more encouragement of the 'flexible' working practices that already condemn millions to low-paid insecure employment; and more intrusive policing of our affairs by the authorities, accelerating the trend towards more censorship, surveillance and control.

This must seem like an outrageous suggestion to many Labour supporters. How, they might well ask, could a Labour government ever be as objectionable as these bloody Tories? To answer that we need to grasp just how far things have changed in British politics. The party names might be the same, but neither the Conservatives nor Labour have much else in common today with the parties they were 15 years ago.

The changes in the character of the Labour Party are often misunderstood. Party spokesmen like to claim that the political and organisational reforms introduced by Blair and his predecessors, John Smith and Neil Kinnock, have revived Labour's fortunes by giving it popular appeal. In fact both the politics and the poll ratings of Blair's New Labour have been largely dictated by the Conservatives.

In political terms, Blair's Labour Party is one of Thatcher's children—and the one of which the old Tory baroness can feel proudest. Through the eighties, the Tories redefined the terms of political debate. The Thatcher government's war against socialism, the trade unions, the public sector and the welfare state impelled the opposition to abandon traditional Labourist principles and distance itself from the working classes. By the time Thatcher was replaced by John Major in 1990, Labour was a shell of a party that could only emit faint echoes of Tory policies on everything from the market economy to law and order.

If the dominance of the Tories in the eighties transformed the Labour Party's outlook, the weakness of the Tories in the nineties has transformed Labour's fortunes. The exhaustion of the Thatcherite programme is evident in Major's increasingly farcical attempts to privatise everything; and the idea that the Tories have created an 'economic miracle' has been thoroughly exposed by the bitter persistence of the capitalist slump. As the divided and discredited Conservatives reel from one disaster to the next, so Labour the beneficiary has raced ahead in the polls. But Blair has reached the doorstep of Downing Street more by default than by dint of anything dynamic within his hollow party.

Understanding the process of political change in this way has important implications. It means that we are not facing a rerun of any of the Labour-Tory election battles of the past. In fact we are not witnessing a contest between left and right at all. Labour was forced to ditch what were considered to be its socialist principles in the eighties; the Tories have had to abandon their commitment to full-blooded 'popular capitalism' in the nineties.

Behind the old party labels, there is now a new situation—one in which neither major party stands for anything of substance at all.

Both Labour and the Tories now eschew principles in favour of pragmatism. Everything is negotiable. Blair will tear up a commitment to renationalise the railways just as quickly as Major will shred plans to privatise the Post Office. Instead of a battle between competing political visions, we are left with a technical contest to prove which party would make the best bureaucratic managers of the system. Labour, said Blair in January, is not offering 'a revolution', but simply 'a competent alternative' to the Tory cabinet. (There is a slogan to inspire the nation's youth.)

Like all pragmatic business managers, the Major and Blair teams accept that they have to operate within limits and budgets. The narrow framework for action which both recognise today has been put in place by a combination of two factors: the capitalist depression and the shift in the terms of debate over which the Tories have presided during the past 15 years.

So it is that, in the sphere of economics, the approach of all the major parties broadly conforms to Treasury orthodoxy, with an emphasis on reducing public spending, especially on welfare, and holding down wages while intensifying work. In the political arena, meanwhile, all the major parties now reject bold proposals for social reform in favour of conservative demands for more law and order and social control. The need to impose austerity and authority on society are the twin themes of British public affairs in the mid-nineties.

If Tory and Labour have converged around a pragmatic approach to managing the crisis of the capitalist system, then why should we believe that Blair would be any better for us than Major? But there is worse to come for Labour supporters. Look a little more closely, and it appears that New Labour is equipped to pursue the politics of austerity and authoritarianism even more ruthlessly than the Conservatives in the context of today.

The Tories have spent years accusing Labour of being stuck in the past. Yet ironically, it is the Conservatives who are most heavily weighed down by the baggage

of history these days. The long years of incumbency have taken their toll on the Tories. Major constantly finds himself hemmed in by commitments and divisions that are the legacies of the past 15 years. His government appears paralysed, unable to act for fear of alienating more of the Tories' traditional base of support.

Blair's Labour opposition has far fewer constraints. He may still encounter the odd hiccup in disposing of a Labourist relic like Clause IV. But in general, New Labour is now travelling light, able to adapt to the management demands of the present without worrying so much about the baggage of the past. The former student politicians, feminists and communitarian academics who surround Blair are also far better placed than the Tories to translate the demands of the market system into a language that appears appropriate for the 1990s. The consequence of all this is that Labour can now often be bolder than the government in putting forward policies of austerity and authoritarianism which, if implemented, would make our lives a misery.

New Labour, for example, is ready to go further than the old Tories in dismantling the welfare state. The Commission on Social Justice report lays the foundations for Labour's future welfare policies. As argued in last month's *Living Marxism*, the changes which the commission proposes 'are not designed to protect people against poverty, but to protect the Treasury against the demands of the poor' ('Anti-social and unjust', January 1995).

Containing proposals to abolish student grants and tax child benefit which Margaret Thatcher in her pomp did not dare to pursue, the Labour-backed report provides an accountant's view of the welfare state. Pension increases are 'expensive', so people will have to take out private plans; it is 'not feasible' to make childcare or healthcare for the elderly free at the point of

New Labour is ready to go further than the old Tories in dismantling the welfare state

use, so individuals will have to pay. In content, this is the old conservative philosophy of leaving the needy to fend for themselves. But presented in the commission's Blairite language of 'community', the assault on the welfare state is made more palatable for today's political climate—and so poses a more insidious and potent threat.

It is the same story with New Labour's approach to law and order. Despite the best efforts of Labour, who refused to vote against his draconian Criminal Justice Act, Tory Home Secretary Michael Howard's law-and-order crusade seems to stall at every turn. Meanwhile Blair's party moves ahead with more and more far-reaching proposals for social control. Presented in the language of liberal and feminist concern for the victims of racism or domestic violence, Labour's proposals to increase police and legal powers can gain widespread support. Yet many go further than the government has yet dared in seeking to strengthen the culture of conformity and control in society.

If you want a glimpse of how repressive it might be to live in Blair's Britain, look at the way Labour local authorities police their housing estates today. Hackney council has introduced the use of civil injunctions to have troublesome tenants evicted or even jailed without trial. Nottingham council has pledged to put spy cameras in the flats of offensive tenants. Leeds council has hired private detectives to mount surveillance operations against its tenants. Imposed under the auspices of anti-racist or anti-

harassment codes, these measures pass with little criticism or protest. Yet the consequences are as authoritarian as anything Howard has dreamed up. The danger of New Labour is not just that its policies are reactionary, but that they are often accepted as being for the good of the community. The problem is that Blair's brand of reaction is not even seen as a problem.

Do not doubt that Tony Blair's team are the people who will dismantle the welfare state and empower the custodial state at the end of the twenty-first century. Labour's leader and his associates have the puritanical disposition of suburban little England at its worst, without a single libertarian bone in their bodies and with contempt for the irresponsible 'underclass' in their hearts. They want more controls on the press and less freedom of speech, more Christian values and fewer single mothers, more rules and more policeman in every corner of society. Tony Blair clearly sees himself as Sunday school teacher to a nation of naughty children.

By their friends shall you know them. Liberal MP David Alton is arguably the most illiberal man in the House of Commons, a professional Catholic and anti-abortion crusader. Last year, fearing that violent videos might incite the Merseyside mob to rampage down his cul-de-sac, Alton put forward an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, imposing still tighter controls on the videos people can watch in their own homes. He needed a kindred spirit to second his amendment: step forward that hip champion of censorship, Tony Blair.

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Female genital mutilation

Maria Jonas writes 'it is mind-boggling that crimes against women's human rights and their physical integrity are used for propaganda purposes' (letters, December). This is precisely my point about the campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM). Western countries and international institutions like the United Nations, which are responsible for the economic and political subjugation of the third world and the suffering it inflicts on women there, have the cheek to preach to Africans about humanitarian abuses. What is even more mind-boggling is that socialists like Maria Jonas are taken in by this cynical manipulation of feminist issues such as FGM.

Eddie Ford (letters, December) says that I made 'even the Victorian missionaries look progressive by comparison'. In my article ('A civilising mission?', October), I pointed out that the Mau Mau revolt against British colonialism in Kenya originated partly in opposition to a campaign by missionaries against female genital mutilation, which was seen by the Kikuyu people as an intrusion into their cultural affairs. Does Eddie Ford find the Kikuyu's struggle against British rule 'barbaric'? The Western missionaries in Kenya certainly did.

I do not accept that Western governments or institutions have the right to determine what cultural practices are acceptable in African societies. To accept that they have that right is to acquiesce in the West's imposition of its own agenda on to the people of the third world. That is domination, whether it is presented in the language of feminism or Christianity.

Cynthia Taylor (letters, November) recognises that 'the sudden concern about female circumcision' in the West 'is an act of manipulation', and she understands the role of feminist ideas in paving the way for intervention. However, she accuses me of 'cultural relativism', and of implying that 'only those who have been brought up in a particular culture should be allowed to say whether or not it ought to continue'.

What I in fact argue is that a recognition of the barbarity of female genital manipulation does not absolve us from the responsibility of understanding the broader social environment in which it takes place. There is nothing culturally relative or 'post-feminist' about recognising that FGM has a wider social significance in Africa (in terms of initiation, rites of passage, ideas of cleanliness and so on) which campaigners in the West have not taken account of. By focusing on female genital mutilation in isolation from the wider social problems of the third world, feminists indulge in the luxury of moral outrage without accepting the destructive consequences of their campaigns.

Cynthia Taylor accuses me of implying that only Africans can understand female genital mutilation. In fact my article is an argument for a clearer understanding in the West of the issues which it raises. It is the very ignorance and uncritical nature of Western campaigners approach to FGM that threatens to turn them into patsies for a racist attack on the third world.

Sandy Deegan London

The poverty of Marxism

James Heartfield ('The last anti-communist hero', November) gives a distorted and inaccurate interpretation of Karl Popper's political philosophy. Firstly, Popper was not against 'holistic planning' simply because he believed it was 'impossible to understand how society worked or the laws under which it operated'. Popper's contention was that holistic planning is inseparable from totalitarianism. The blueprint or master plan, which is the basis of this type of planning, has as its goal the establishment of an Utopia. The attempt to realise an ideal state demands a strong centralised rule of a few who impose the dictates of the blueprint in a violent and authoritarian fashion.

Secondly, to say that Popper believed that it is impossible to 'understand society because it is too complicated' is a gross distortion of his work. Popper's view is that the practical consequences of the reconstruction of society as a whole are difficult to calculate. Heartfield conflates Popper's reticence to undertake the large-scale reconstruction of society with 'vacating the field of reason'. Popper simply prefers piecemeal social change because small-scale failure has less disastrous consequences than large-scale failure. The piecemeal approach is still scientific and rational—it adopts the method of trial and error and permits repeated experiments and continuous readjustments. Popper certainly does not reject rationality. In fact he attempts to reduce politics to an exact science.

Finally, Popper believes that man is the master of his own destiny and that we can influence and change the history of man in accordance with our aims. He regards the state's social institutions as instruments which are to be constructed or altered in accordance with our specific intentions. By contrast, Marx sees society and man's destiny as determined by the ineluctable laws of history, and he, therefore, believes that rational planning of social institutions is futile.

It is Marx and not Popper who vacates the field of reason. In practice, Marx's historicist attitude has elitist consequences—only 'the party' in a Marxist state can correctly interpret and predict the great play of the forces of history. The truth is that Heartfield (and any

thorough-going Marxist) elevates historical prediction to the level of reason and science.
Neil Pellegrini Rynfield, South Africa

Healthy resolution

I agree entirely with your article about healthy eating ('Healthy eating in a diseased society', January). Healthy eating, which often comes down to food fads, may be all right for the well-off middle classes, but it ignores the class nature of eating. Working class people cannot afford to eat healthily. I've made my New Year resolution which is to eat in McDonald's and spend the time I save in cooking and shopping in trying to do something about the rotten system we live under.

Charles Murray Tottenham, London

Mis-hitting postmodernism

I found Suke Wolton's review article interesting ('White power', December), but I cannot help feeling she has picked on the wrong people (some of the wrong people, anyway) to make an otherwise valid case against social constructivism, identity politics, and similar post-modern conceits.

Is it really the case that Allen and Roediger deny the material conditions constituting the social construction of the white race? Not that I endorse the obsolete project of the abolition of 'whiteness' (as recently as the seventies I would have gone along with this metaphorical construct, but these days non-whiteness is as banal and bankrupt as whiteness, at least in the USA), but is Roediger that dumb about the material basis of racial categorisation? Or Ted Allen? Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is of epochal importance. In short, I understand the thrust of Wolton's objections to this whole post-modern constructivist mindset, but she should have taken the trouble to review the books purportedly under review, and has instead done their authors a serious disservice.

Ralph Dumain rdumain@igc.apc.org

History lesson

I am writing to take issue with Toby Banks' left-wing philistinism ('1994 and all that', January)—his crass statement dismissing Ruth and Eddy Frow's laudable working class movement library, and its probable closure, as another unimportant shrine to the past. As a labour historian and Marxist, I find the probable closure a tragedy, as we have much to learn from our rich labour history tapestry, from the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to the Levellers and Diggers, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Chartists, New Unionism, etc—a history that yields many lessons that the left naively and arrogantly ignore.

The bourgeoisie have always applauded and venerated their class heroes, well so should the left. I would like to see England peppered with statues and red plaques to revolutionaries, radicals and reformers. Banks' statement is so typical of the alchemists of revolution's dismissal of the often significant role of individuals in the ages of reform and revolution.

As the organiser of alternative guided walks of the Londons of Marx, Lenin, Engels *et al*, I have always been amazed at the lack of basic knowledge of the important watersheds in labour history. I find Banks' statement, 'that the left has spent too much of the past 50 years paying homage to the dubious achievements of the British unions', ill-informed and sectarian.

In a period where the postwar consensus has shifted undeniably to the right, I feel it is necessary that we look back to examples of working class solidarity. As Marx said, 'those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it, first as tragedy and second as farce'. It is important that we remember a labour past and its personalities, as examples to learn from and inspire.

Marc Deith Finchley, London

Cars and moral blackmail

Brian Miller (letters, January) illustrates the irrationality underlying the anti-car lobby. Miller is worried about the 'consequences' of increased car use. But what are these 'consequences'? Presumably he means pollution. In which case it would have been nice to know whether he disagreed with my substantive empirical point ('The petrol pollution scam', December), that the fear of pollution from cars is misplaced because existing technology will lead to a fall in pollution from cars over the next 20 years, despite increased car use.

Miller has nothing to say about these stubborn facts. He prefers instead to mount the high moral ground. 'Car "need" is created and stimulated by road-building', he claims. In so far as this is true, so what? Walking up mountains is stimulated by path-building. Watching television is stimulated by there being programmes on it.

The whole tone of the more-roads-more-cars thesis is that car use is immoral. My article made the point that this kind of environmental moral blackmail is an ideal way for the government to screw more money out of us. Surprise, surprise—the government slapped an

extra levy on petrol in both the budget and the mini-budget. Miller's weak populist twist on this scam is to paint himself as a defender of workers struggling to pay off their car loans. Rather than saving us from the burden of debt by discouraging us from buying cars, I've got a better idea. I know it is environmentally incorrect, with its implication of raised consumption, but what about more money for workers so that they can easily afford a car?

John Gillott Haringey, London

The privilege of risk-awareness

Having attended the Making of Moral Panics conference in November, Thomas Austin (letters, January) reports that 'popular impulses towards safety and security were ridiculed from positions of relative safety and privilege'.

I too attended the conference, and my understanding of what was said is completely different. I came away with a sense of a concerted effort to investigate and explain why it is that highly intelligent, eminently sensible people are being drawn deeper and deeper into a spiral of nonsensical concerns. I heard it clearly explained that the epidemic of popular fears is derived—not from any crime epidemic—but from the widespread sense of isolation and insecurity arising from the erosion of every tradition of social solidarity. As a result, the mean-spirited worldview of the traditionally insecure middle classes has got a grip on the whole population.

Austin concludes that 'risk is a relative luxury not available equally to all in our inequitable society'. I must point out that the risk-awareness industry is staffed exclusively by those in positions of 'relative safety and privilege'—journalists, academics, doctors, priests and politicians. If we want an equitable society, we will have to stick our necks out and challenge their authority. It's the only way to initiate a new and progressive sense of common interest and social solidarity.

Geraldine Mitcham Isleworth

Swansea readers

I would be most obliged if you would publish an appeal for readers to correspond with myself, for the purposes of establishing a *Living Marxism* readers' group in the Swansea area.

Brendan S Forbes 41 Heathfield, Mountpleasant, Swansea SA1 6EJ

Boring and repetitive?

D Sheppard (letters, January) claims that Oasis are 'the best new thing in British music'. Definitely good, but certainly not new. If Blur are 'nostalgia peddlers', the same could equally be applied to Oasis who are regurgitating a few restyled Beatles numbers complete with whimsical sixties lyrics. What we are seeing is a back-to-basics campaign on the part of the music establishment. Hence the shift back to the traditional four-piece and acoustic numbers—Nirvana's Unplugged session, for example.

Popular music is in a state of transition to a more technologically innovative style of music. All the bands at the cutting edge of music are techno-motivated: Portishead, Orbital, Richard Hawtin and so on. The *Living* section has obviously had the foresight to recognise this and to write about it. Leave the past where it belongs, the future is here!

D Cooper Ambleside, Cumbria

Since the 1960s pop/rock music has constantly sought to reinvent itself in some new exciting form. Yet it always fails miserably because there's not a lot you can do with boring, repetitive crap. You can speed it up and swear (punk, new wave), speed it up some more and shout instead (rap, house), put the emphasis on a different beat (reggae, ska), sweeten it up and call it classy (soul, Tamla, Philly), synthesise it (electronic), dress differently (glam, new romantic), or just go for a bloody racket (heavy metal, anything John Peel likes).

At the end of the day, new fads rarely last longer than a few years because boring, repetitive crap can only be disguised for so long. You only have to look at the bands that sell consistently well over the years (Phil Collins, Dire Straits, Sting, Stones, Pink Floyd) to realise that it is only being boring, repetitive and crap that makes you real money these days!

Pop music's days are numbered when distortion and feedback are trumpeted as innovations! This is why I find it so surprising that *Living Marxism* gives so much of its *Living* section to the latest attempt by four or five spotty kids to be the future of rock 'n' roll. Next time I'm outside the Covent Garden opera house being pelted with eggs by anarchists, I'll reflect on the anti-culture climate that yours and other left-wing magazines, who should know better, help to perpetuate.

'Don Van Vliet' 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 fax (0171) 278 9844 e-mail lm@camintl.org



A critical look at the conventional wisdom on social, moral and sexual issues.

TABOOS

Pre-menstr

Blaming pre-menstrual syndrome for bad behaviour only endorses the dangerous idea that women cannot control themselves, says Ann Bradley

One of the saddest crime stories reported at the end of last year was the Painter stabbing. Jan Painter accidentally stabbed her husband, James, in a domestic fight. He had hit her, but he knew he was wrong to do so, she had picked up a kitchen knife in a gesture and knifed him by accident. As he lay dying, she reportedly cradled his head crying, 'God Jimmy, I didn't mean it. I love you'. He regained consciousness for long enough to tell her: 'I love you, I love you, I'll never leave you.' Two hours later he was dead and Jan Painter was charged with manslaughter.

When the case came to court in December, Jan Painter was acquitted. Even the dead man's brothers said they could not condemn the accused. Mr Justice Morland accepted that the matter was an accidental, spontaneous

family tragedy. 'The Painters', he said, 'had a happy marriage. There were tiffs between them about money, but these quarrels never degenerated into violence before that occasion. They were clearly passionately in love with each other'.

Nobody could take serious issue with the decision. For once the courts probably came to a fair decision. Had the court simply decided that this was a situation where two people had a barney which flew out of control, there would have been nothing to remark on.

What is a cause for concern, however, is the case made by the defence barrister, and accepted by the judge, that Jan Painter's actions were a consequence of her pre-menstrual tension. In accepting this, the court reinforced the notion that there is something intrinsic to women which

rual

tensions

causes them to behave in an irrational and uncontrolled manner.

Pre-menstrual tension is frequently raised as an excuse for anti-social actions carried out by women. This is the first time it has been accepted as mitigation for manslaughter but it has frequently been cited as a justification for more minor misdemeanours, particularly driving offences and shoplifting. Feminist columnists and women's page editors have, in the main, been supportive of those bringing forward the 'PMT defence' on the grounds that it acknowledges that women live under different circumstances to men and so need special understanding.

There is of course an element of truth in what they say. There are many particular pressures on women which can drive us beyond the bounds of sanity. Watch a woman trying to control two young children and a shopping trolley in a busy supermarket on a Wednesday afternoon, and you might wonder how it is that the number of child murders is so low. Talk to a student nurse about what she has to put up with in the course of her

working day and it begs the question of why patients, junior doctors and consultants alike are not massacred on a regular basis.

The social circumstances in which we live and work are enough to cause all of us to flip from time to time, and women are often in a particularly vulnerable position because they often have fewer avenues of escape from the frustrations of everyday life. A working woman is probably less able to go out for a drink with her mates after a gruelling day at work—she is more likely to be belting home to get the dinner on or the ironing done. If anyone is stuck at home all day with only a toddler for company, it is more likely to be the wife and mother than the husband and father. Even when women are at work, the jobs they do are frequently support or administrative posts where they absorb other people's tensions and resolve their practical problems. Small wonder some women are prone to the odd psychopathic moment. However, it is more appropriate to blame the way we live for inducing our moments of madness than it is to blame our hormones.

The most worrying aspect of the 'PMT defence' is that it implicitly accepts that women are prone to irrational behaviour on account of their hormones, and should therefore be judged according to different standards from those who are consistently rational and responsible—that is, men. This is both insulting to women and runs counter to the long-fought battle for the principle that women are capable of enjoying equality. It reduces women to the status of children whose bad behaviour must be excused, or at least understood, as they are not in possession of all their faculties.

Women's biological difference has been used as a justification for excluding them from public life for as long as society has needed to justify their exclusion. In her excellent book, *Biological Politics* (1982), Janet Sayers, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Kent, traces the attempts to explain women's oppression as a consequence of biological difference. And she observes that the arguments used to discriminate against women are frequently posed as a means of defending them. ►

For example, in the nineteenth century the exclusion of women from education was justified on the basis that women had smaller brains and would not be able to cope with the rigours of study. The debilitating effect of menstruation has constantly been cited as a reason why women could not lead professional or even active lives. Through the early part of this century feminists battled against the notion promoted by health experts that menstruation was a time in women's lives when they were, in the words of George J Englemann, President of the American Gynaecological Society in 1900, 'susceptible to morbid influences and vulnerable to serious derangements'.

Where traditionally feminists denied that menstruation prevents women functioning normally, today they embrace this idea. There is now little opposition to the notion that pre-menstrual symptoms destabilise women on a monthly basis. In fact, today it is regarded by many as nothing short of misogynist to argue that pre-menstrual symptoms should be disregarded as a significantly debilitating factor in women's lives. This is despite the fact that there seems to be no more evidence to support the argument that the pre-menstrual hormonal changes affect women's behaviour than there is to support the argument that a difference in men's and women's brain size is responsible for their performance in education.

Pre-menstrual syndrome is understood to be a set of emotional, behavioral and physical symptoms that recur in the second half of a woman's menstrual cycle—that is in the week or so before the start of her period. But it is worth questioning whether pre-menstrual syndrome even exists as a biological condition that can determine the way women behave.

Of course some women suffer physical symptoms in the days before their period, and there are sound physiological reasons why this would happen. At different times in a woman's menstrual cycle her body releases different quantities of different hormones. In the first half of the cycle, prior to ovulation, the hormones are mainly to ripen the egg and prepare for its release. After ovulation the hormone balance changes so as to allow the body to prepare for a possible pregnancy. Once the body recognises that there is no pregnancy to sustain, hormones trigger the start of the menstrual bleed and the cycle starts all over again.

Many women who are not using the contraceptive pill (which overrides the natural hormone signals) notice physical changes throughout the month according to which particular hormone



is dominating at a particular time. Most women have some physical sign that their period is due to start, often backache, swollen or tender breasts or general bloatedness caused by the raised level of the hormone progesterone. And, of course, it is possible that these real changes in hormones may have a psychological or behavioral effect as well as a physical

For one week in the month women have an excuse to behave badly and binge on chocolate

effect. But doctors have found it notoriously difficult to take their understanding of pre-menstrual syndrome beyond a vague definition.

Many feminist writers have argued that this is because the medical profession has invested insufficient resources in the research, since it is dominated by men who do not experience the condition directly. But a cursory look over references to medical papers on the issue belies a claim that it has been neglected. On the contrary, the medical profession has so much information about pre-menstrual syndrome that it does not know where to start. However, much of it is intolerably vague. For example, more than 150 symptoms of pre-menstrual syndrome have been described, of which the most common emotional and behavioral symptoms are: irritability, anxiety, poor concentration, poor work performance, change in libido, food-cravings and fatigue—all symptoms which the entire staff of *Living Marxism* claim to suffer as each publication date approaches.

What defines these general conditions as symptoms of pre-menstrual syndrome is if they occur at a regular time before the woman's period, so allowing doctors to conclude that they are linked to hormonal changes. From this you could logically conclude that, if the hormonal changes cause the symptoms, then the symptoms would not occur if the hormonal changes did not take place. Yet this does not seem to be the case.

In studies where doctors have used drugs to eliminate the normal pre-menstrual hormone surges in some women, and compared their experience of pre-menstrual symptoms to those of untreated women, they found that *all* the women suffered their usual degree of symptoms. Besides, if the normal hormone surges were responsible for pre-menstrual symptoms you would not expect women using contraceptives

pills or older women on hormone replacement therapy to experience pre-menstrual syndrome, because their monthly bleeds are not 'real' periods. But many do experience precisely the same symptoms. Furthermore, pre-menstrual syndrome responds curiously well to placebo treatment. Placebo-controlled studies invariably show that more than 50 per cent of women suffering from pre-menstrual syndrome improve with 'dummy' treatments. In one trial of surgically inserted hormone implants, 94 per cent of women improved on the placebo. There is clearly something more than a simple biological process going on here.

It is undeniable that some women do flip out in the days before their periods start, and that many more experience symptoms of stress and tension. But perhaps the reason is less rooted in our biology than in what menstruation signifies for women in Western societies. For most women, the start of a menstrual period is a statement that they are not pregnant. That is a socially and psychologically loaded confirmation for a woman, regardless of how she might feel about a possible pregnancy, in a society where pregnancy can turn your career, relationships and life upside down. In so far as pre-menstrual syndrome exists, it is more likely to be bound up with the complexity of existing social and psychological tensions and pressures in our lives than it is with the surges of hormones in our bodies.

For many women, consciously or unconsciously, an impending period provides a once-a-month excuse to let rip. For one week in the month we have an excuse to behave badly and binge on chocolate. That is fine, but when we use it as a justification for uncontrollable behaviour we can expect to have it thrown back in our faces. After all, if women really are biologically prone to irrational behaviour, how can we be trusted in everyday life? Would you employ a woman as an airline pilot or a surgeon or even a swimming pool attendant if you thought that one week in four she would lose her ability to function normally?

It is far better to isolate the life pressures that drive us insane and to try to deal with them, than to search for a biological explanation for bad behaviour. The Painters' fight was over the fact that he took £1.20 from her purse. At the trial it became clear that in so far as they argued it was over money. Presumably had they had sufficient cash to get by they would not have had the fatal fight. Jan Painter needs a higher income, not treatment for pre-menstrual syndrome.



Myra Hindley—a bad woman

Myra Hindley is right. The decision that for her a life sentence must mean life is a political one. But she is wrong to assume that the reason why the Home Secretary has decided against her eventual parole is simply because it would be a vote loser for the Tories. There are broader, if less conscious, political considerations at stake.

The Moors murderers—Hindley and Ian Brady—lured five children to their deaths between 1963 and 1965. Since then many other horrific crimes and criminals have entered Britain's chamber of horrors. Yet none has come close to the durability of Hindley and Brady as objects of public hatred. They have played a powerful symbolic role as the incarnations of human evil. They appear periodically in the press as a sort of modern re-enactment of a medieval mystery play, in which the forces of darkness are paraded so that they can be vanquished by a public display of faith in the virtues of decency and discipline—today represented by a *Sun* readers' phone poll. In this way the authorities and the press hope to exorcise the demons so close to the surface of life in modern Britain.

But there is another reason why Hindley is singled out for special treatment. The primary reason why she will die in prison is because she is a woman. Her crime is perceived as more than a crime against humanity—it is a crime against womanhood. Hindley stands in antithesis to everything that women are supposed to be.

The refrain at the time of her trial was, 'how could a woman ever be involved in such a thing?', and it still echoes now. The fact that she was merely the accomplice, the woman who lured the victims while her lover Ian Brady sexually assaulted and then slaughtered them, is forgotten. We have become accustomed to men killing, even male serial killers, but a woman's involvement is still abhorrent, even in today's brutalised times.

Myra Hindley serves her sentence not just as a killer, or even a killer of children, but as a woman who went against everything society expects of women. She is a woman who was not only unswayed by maternal instinct, but who manipulated the fact that her victims trusted her as a woman.

Her recycled photo from the time of her arrest—bleach blonde, dark roots, dark eyes, red lips—shows her as a hard-faced hussy. Even the accounts of her relationship with Brady reveal her to be insufficiently modest for a pre-women's lib woman. Not for Hindley the everyday drudgery of Manchester mid-sixties womanhood. By her own account she claims to have been terrified of the domestic drudgery which was consuming her friends. Brady was the only man she had ever met who enjoyed poetry, politics and classical music, who was arrogant, sexually adventurous and unconventional.

Hindley's first crime was that she rejected domesticity for Brady,

and then that she failed to play the part of the restraining woman. We do not only blame Hindley for her complicity in Brady's murders, but for failing to do what a good woman should—hold him back or shop him to the police. Hindley, a working class Lancashire girl, rejected the conventional working class path to wifedom. She untied herself from the apron-strings of domesticity—and look at the mayhem and carnage that resulted when the woman ran wild.

Hindley is further condemned because she still fails to play the woman's part. Remember the tabloid disclosures about her lesbian love affair with a prison visitor, and the general obsession with her sexual orientation. The papers condemn her for her abnormal sexual tastes, without a moment's contemplation on what could constitute normal sexual expression for someone who has been locked up for 30 years with no hope of a 'normal relationship'—ever.

Even Hindley's ongoing fight for an end to her sentence counts against her. Brady has always accepted that he would never be released and has settled down to life in isolation under rule 43. He has also had the decency conspicuously to display a few mental problems and behave in a demented and tormented manner. Hindley, in contrast, is open about her resentment at the fact that other killers have served their time and been accepted back into society while she is condemned to serve the rest of her days in prison.

Hindley has the audacity to tell the *Sunday Times* that she clings to life and believes she deserves another chance at it. And why not? Other murderers, far less repentant than Hindley are released every day. In fact the Home Secretary is falling over himself to clear the cells. Coming from anybody else, a claim of harsh treatment might at least spark a discussion about the inconsistency of sentencing policy, or about whether the purpose of prison terms was reform or revenge. But coming from Hindley's mouth, the claim to have paid her price and served her time is seen as an affront to human decency.

December's announcement that Myra Hindley would never be released simply provided another opportunity for the newspapers to relive the details of her crimes—and another chance for them to get the relatives of her victims to reopen their wounds, by rehearsing their rather pathetic accounts of what they would do if only they could get their hands on her.

I have no more compassion for Myra Hindley than she had for her victims. But we should be clear about why it is that the Home Secretary keeps her incarcerated in Cookham Wood. It is not because of the authorities' abhorrence at serial killers. After all, in different circumstances, the government is prepared to reward mass killers with a medal. It is because of their abhorrence at serial killers who happen to be women. ●

A symbolic role as the incarnation of human evil

A Russian bombshell

Chechnya has come to symbolise a political crisis afflicting the governments of both the East and the West. Gillian Reid reports (right) on the fragmentation of Russian authority. Joan Phillips explains (below) why Western leaders were just about the only people who backed Boris Yeltsin's war against the Chechens

Commentators sympathetic to the plight of Chechnya have told us that the struggle for independence in this far-flung republic is about the reawakening of an age-old nationalism. The Chechens are depicted as a proud mountain race, taking up the fight once again for control of their rugged territory in the face of 'the new Russian imperialism'.

All of this serves only to obscure the facts. Chechen nationalism is a very modern invention. Far from building a new empire, the Russian state is fragmenting. In order to restore the waning power of Moscow, president Boris Yeltsin has had to resort to bombing his own subjects in Chechnya, which has long been part of Russia.

The original rebellion in Chechnya was an expression of the diminution of Russian state power; the hamfisted

military intervention was an attempt to restore the authority of the centre, but has served only to underline its weakness.

Chechnya is not a historic nation. It is more like what Middle East observers used to call 'an oilfield with a flag'. Only in 1991, after the Soviet Union had collapsed and oil had been discovered locally, did Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet Air Force general, discover Chechen nationalism and declare his country's independence from Russia. Far from being a centuries-old pedigree, Chechen nationalism is a very recent and self-conscious discovery as far as Dudayev and his cronies are concerned. The espousal of nationalism endows their petty ambitions for oil wealth and territory with legitimacy.

Against the centre

For ordinary Chechens, meanwhile, nationalism means little more than contempt for Moscow. They harbour deep resentments against the centre, but then so do most people throughout the Russian federation, wherever they are and whatever their nationality. The revolt in Chechnya is only an extreme expression of the diminishing scale of loyalties that is evident the length and breadth of Russia.

Over the past three years since the collapse of the Soviet Union,

The West's worst nightmare

For years, the West has denounced the Kremlin as an oppressor and demanded freedom for all of the republics in what was the Soviet Union. Yet when Russian bombers pounded Grozny, the capital of the breakaway republic of Chechnya in December 1994, Western governments either stayed silent or stated that it was an internal Russian problem, and that president Boris Yeltsin had no choice but to suppress the secessionists by military means.

Western leaders backed Yeltsin's war against the Chechens out of concern for their own futures. Looking at the Russian crisis, they see a deeply unpopular government, public disaffection from the institutions of the state, and a fragmenting central authority. In their eyes, it must all seem

frighteningly like a more dramatic version of the situation at home. Chechnya is the insecure Western elites' worst nightmare, because it provides a glimpse of what they fear might happen to them in the future.

Free world on hold

In these circumstances, the Western authorities have abandoned any talk of freedom and democracy in the East. Their only concern now is to see the maintenance of stability and control, whether by Yeltsin or somebody else. That is why they backed his efforts to blow the Chechen rebels off the map—and why they raised criticisms of the military campaign only when it became clear that the botched invasion was making matters worse.

Western societies are suffering from a permanent legitimacy crisis.

Since the end of the Cold War, the political systems of every capitalist nation have come unstuck. The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the West of a decrepit, undemocratic system against which a less-than-perfect capitalist order could look good. Today capitalism is having to sell itself on its own merits. And without the negative alternative of communism, the slump capitalism of the 1990s is none too appealing.

Across the Western world, the old political systems of the Cold War era are breaking down. Parties are disintegrating; traditional state institutions are falling into disrepute; governments cannot project any positive vision; politicians are generally held in contempt.

The persistence of the global economic slump has not helped

the authority and legitimacy of the Russian state which succeeded it have been eroded. The institutions of the state no longer command respect. Politicians are scorned by the public. Opinion polls show that 75 per cent of Russians oppose the government. Against this background of fragmenting authority, the local revolt in Chechnya was seen to pose a threat to Russia's rulers out of all proportion to the issues involved.

The sources of Russia's legitimacy

crisis are manifold. But the main problem is that the new society offers people neither security in the present nor hope for the future. For most people it has been three hard, disillusioning years since Boris Yeltsin's dramatic ousting of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Broken promise

In 1991, Yeltsin stood on a tank next to conscripts with carnations in their rifles and promised market reforms and

democracy to the people of Russia, and independence to the republics. In 1995, capitalist reforms have failed to transform Russian society in the manner that many expected. Instead of improving people's lives, the market has inflicted austerity and insecurity. While a few get very rich, millions live in penury. With the reform process stalled and instability rife, Western analysts have attached a 90 per cent risk factor to investment in Russia. Meanwhile, the promise of democracy ►

PHOTO: PRESS ASSOCIATION



the capitalist class to cope with the loss of its old enemy. It is hard to inspire people about what capitalism has to offer when insecurity and austerity are the order of the day.

The result is that nobody believes in anything very much these days. There is nothing compelling people to give their allegiance to anybody. Although abstention from the political process has not yet reached East European proportions, it is growing rapidly in the West.

In the context of the disintegrative trends at work in Western societies, the fragmentation of the Russian state strikes fear into the hearts of governments everywhere. That is why all the Western powers backed Yeltsin over Chechnya. All pronouncements from Western capitals have stressed that Chechnya

is legally part of the Russian federation and that Yeltsin has the right to restore law and order in the breakaway republic

'Suppress the rebels!'

America did not mince words when the crisis erupted. Washington bluntly told Moscow to stop messing around and restore order. Bill Clinton's administration said that Russia's handling of the region was its internal business. Washington emphasised that the borders of the Russian federation are inviolate, even when regions like Chechnya containing a majority of non-Russians demand independence.

The US press echoed the White House line. 'The three-year insurrection cannot be allowed to stand', declared a *New York Times* editorial. 'Although a negotiated settlement would be the best outcome, Mr Yeltsin is justified

in using military force to suppress the rebellion.' (14 December 1994) The paper said that Washington should quietly counsel the president in the application of force, and offered some counselling itself: 'His [Yeltsin's] task is to move decisively to depose Mr Dudayev, then end the bloodletting as quickly as he can.'

So concerned was Clinton to demonstrate his support for Yeltsin that in the middle of the crisis, when Russian tanks and aircraft were on their way to Grozny, he sent his vice-president, Al Gore, to hold the president's hand in Moscow. It would seem that Gore told Yeltsin to get on with it, because soon after that the bombs began to rain down on Grozny.

Britain followed America in giving full support to Yeltsin. Downing Street insisted that the ►

◀ was broken more than a year ago when the president sent in the tanks to pound parliament. The assumption of dictatorial powers by Yeltsin only deepened popular disgust for the whole cabal in Moscow.

The Chechnya debacle illustrates the collapse of central authority in Russia. In the past, Moscow would have resolved the problem before it became a crisis, using tried-and-tested divide-and-rule tactics, manoeuvring Dudayev out of the way without a fuss. Chechnya's declaration of independence in 1991 showed that Moscow was already losing its touch. And it has been downhill all the way since then.

Bungled coup

A year after Dudayev's declaration of independence, Yeltsin decided to send in troops and cut the supply lines to Grozny. But he backed down when parliament refused to support him, withdrawing the troops and reopening supply lines. Moscow then tried to resolve the problem at arm's length in the old Soviet fashion. It groomed an opposition, armed them, sent in undercover troops and backed two coup attempts against Dudayev. All of these bungled attempts to resolve the problem ended in fiasco, further undermining the authority of the centre.

Having been humiliated by Dudayev, Moscow put its authority on the line by launching an invasion. But the bloody and botched military operation has served only to expose the extent to which the centre has lost its grip. The military exemplifies the process of fragmentation that is undermining the power and prestige of every state institution.

The Russian army feels hard done by as a result of recent budget changes. Officers are no longer assured of the privileges that once came with rank. In the higher ranks everybody is trying to carve out their own fiefdoms. Late last year this led to a major scandal when Dmitri Kholodov, a journalist working for Moscow's most popular paper, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, was murdered while investigating top-level corruption in the army. The bomb that killed him was blamed on the top brass, and in particular the defence minister, General Pavel Grachev. The scandal exposed the divisions within the ministry itself, with generals hurling insults at one another through proxies in the press.

Meanwhile rank-and-file conscript soldiers are badly fed and poorly cared for. All they want to do is drink, eat, sleep and keep warm. It is hardly surprising that an army made up of disgruntled officers and unhappy conscripts should have botched the

invasion of Chechnya. At least half a dozen generals have refused to fight and denounced the operation. Some of those involved in the campaign have recoiled from attacking civilians. One flank of the Russian army moving on Grozny in December mutinied, refusing to advance further on the Chechen capital. Conscripts do not want to fight, and who can blame them? An army which lets its soldiers starve is one which will leave its wounded to the mercies of the enemy. If you cannot rely on your comrades if you get shot, what incentive is there to fight?

Ragtag army

The sight of soldiers in tanks being stopped in their tracks by *babushkas* with placards summed up the demoralised state of Russia's army. Brave though they are, the ragtag Chechen fighters are not the stuff of legend. They owe their reputation for audacity to the shocking state of the Russian military.

The Chechnya invasion was meant to be about restoring control and a semblance of central authority. Instead it has revealed the incapacity of Moscow to command obedience from its republics, politicians, generals or soldiers. The more forcibly that Yeltsin tries to reassert the rule of the Russian state, the more its power is seen to be ebbing away.

◀ revolt in Chechnya was an internal Russian problem, and urged the president to restore order at the earliest opportunity.

The *Times* captured the fears of the establishment about the humiliation of the state represented by the events in Chechnya: 'To allow Chechnya to tear up the Russian constitution would also represent a threat to democracy. Russian statehood is vulnerable enough, without conceding a precedent of unilateral declarations of independence.... Even the weakening of Moscow's authority in this context would have security implications for the whole European land mass. As Mr Yeltsin steels himself to reimpose order among Tolstoy's "turbulent and predatory Asiatics", his critics should remember that it is the Chechens who are the outlaws.' (21 December 1994)

Neither the *Times* nor the British government gives two hoots about democracy in Russia, which does not exist anyway; all they care about is the maintenance of order and stability. To this end they are prepared to back

the use of force to put down the threat to the integrity of the state. Another editorial denounced Chechnya as a 'gangster state' with no legal or moral claim to independence, and said that the use of force 'must be coordinated, overwhelming and decisive' (13 December 1994).

Internal matter

Germany too backed Yeltsin. Even after Grozny had taken a pounding, the German foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, refused to condemn Moscow. He said that it was impossible to take a firm stand on the events in Chechnya. Kinkel insisted that the bombings and killings in Grozny were 'an internal Russian matter'. He added that nobody could deny Russia the right to prevent parts of the federation 'drifting away'.

A French foreign ministry spokesman said that France viewed the territory of Chechnya as an 'integral part of the Russian federation'. Like all the rest, Paris made clear that its sympathies were with Moscow.

Only after Moscow had made such a meal of the invasion that it

was becoming an embarrassment did a few critical noises issue forth from Western capitals. Yet even then the furthest anybody went in criticising Yeltsin was to suggest that he might not really be in control of the situation. As usual it was a mysterious clique of invisible 'hardliners' who got the flak. It would not be surprising if Western leaders had advised Yeltsin to step up the bombardments and blame it all on shadowy figures in the military. This is because the West would rather that Moscow got the bloody business over with than that the crisis dragged on and further weakened the authority of the state.

Yeltsin was given *carte blanche* to restore order in Russia, not because Western leaders have any personal sympathy for him (they think he is a drunken, boorish oaf), but because they crave order abroad as well as at home. Yeltsin could yet fall if the Chechnya fiasco escalates. But as long as he retains a semblance of control over events, he can bank on the backing of the West as he bombs on in defence of the power of the state.

Where's the beef?

James Heartfield's heart does not go out to exported animals

At Shoreham on the Sussex coast, at Plymouth, Prestwick and Grimsby protesters have besieged companies exporting animals for the tables of Europe, and have come to blows with the police. The protests have shaken one government minister and once again threatened the Tories' hold over middle England.

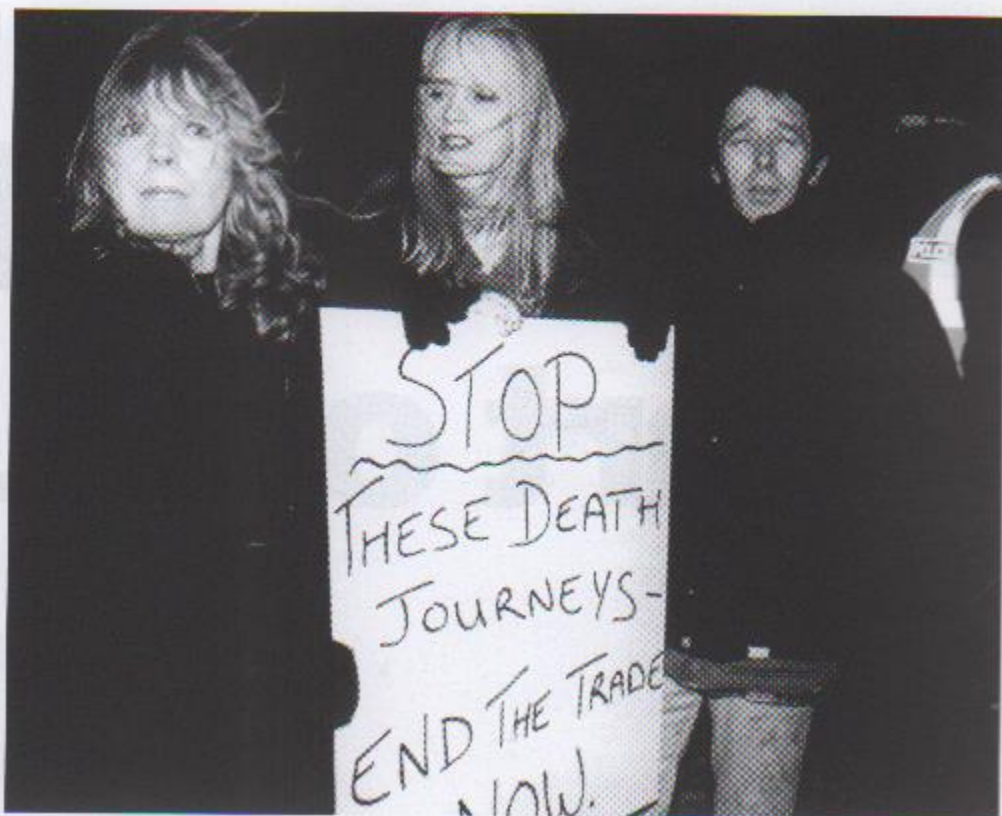
The passion and the activism of the animal welfare protesters trying to stop livestock from being exported for slaughter is in stark contrast to the jaded and corrupt politics of the palace of Westminster. Professional politicians make a virtue of believing in nothing very strongly at all these days. Tony Blair does not believe in socialism and John Major is pretty lukewarm about the free market. Principles, according to the parliamentary cynics are made to be broken.

But the cause of the animal-export protesters is wholly untarnished. No cow ever put VAT on fuel or took a bribe to ask a question in parliament. No sheep ever rewrote its party's statement of principle in a bid to buy a few cheap votes. Livestock protests stand out against the tired arguments of traditional politics, but this is only because they are not about people at all—which exemplifies the problem with the Shoreham demonstrations.

Animals are the ideal object of sympathy for people who have given up on the human race. Conservatives have always been into animal welfare as a kind of calculated snub to other people. Like those batty old ladies who leave all their money to Battersea dogs home just to spite their relatives, the cause of animal welfare is dear to the hearts of misanthropists everywhere.

Animal welfare has often been a good way for reactionaries to sound off about the cruel way that foreigners treat their animals. From donkey-torturing Spaniards to dog-eating Koreans, foreigners have always been compared unfavourably to the animal-loving English. Now the French are being pilloried because they like veal. In the past, far-right parties infiltrated animal rights groups as a platform for xenophobic attacks on Jews and Muslims for the 'ritual slaughter' of kosher and halal meat. Today right-wing Tories of the Euro-sceptic persuasion, like Alan Clark, are getting into animal welfare protests as a way of showing up the inhuman eating habits of the frogs and dagos.

The tales of middle class protesters taking to the streets should surprise nobody. These kind of people have always been more emotionally committed to animal welfare than the welfare of other people. More remarkable is the number of younger, militant protesters who are stirred



to blockade the ports on behalf of calves. Many people who protested against the Criminal Justice Act last summer have been down to Shoreham to stop the calves being exported. For them too, disillusionment with traditional politics has encouraged a concern with animal rights.

According to Geoff Mulgan of the radical think-tank Demos, the animal rights protesters are part of a new 'post-humanist agenda' that is questioning 'speciesism' (*Guardian*, 7 January 1995). What he means is that radicals today think that it is wrong to discriminate against animals, or to see humans as superior. Are they mad?

Of course people are superior to animals. Only people could come up with an idea like rights or suffering—concepts which are quite alien to the animal world. People use animals all the time. If people like William Waldegrave had not bred them in the first place there would be no calves to feel sorry for.

Young children often empathise with animals. Children's stories often give animals human characteristics, like Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, or Walt Disney's Lion King. But when adults are still moved to tears by the bleating of sheep they could only be going out of their way to recapture the innocence of their youth. Like the conservatives, radicals take up the cause of animal rights because they are cynical about the politics of human liberation.

There is one aspect of the livestock protests that does seem to be worthy of praise, and that is their willingness to break the law. Civil disobedience has been the hallmark of the protests at Shoreham and other ports. But the truth is that

there is nothing positive about breaking the law for a reactionary cause.

What is remarkable about the Shoreham protests is the way that the authorities have reacted to civil disobedience. Despite the stories, the police have been remarkably restrained in dealing with a mass outbreak of illegal activity. In contrast to the rough treatment handed out to squatters and travellers over the summer, the livestock protesters have been treated with, well, kid gloves.

The *Independent* newspaper showered praise on the law-breakers, 'the best of Britain: passionate, determined and brave'—unlike those nasty pickets who tried to blockade Wapping and Orgreave in defence of jobs in the bad old days (6 January 1995). If animal welfare protests represented any real challenge to authority we can be sure that they would be attacked by the establishment, not coddled and flattered.

Before his veal interests were exposed, agriculture minister William Waldegrave was proposing that animal welfare protesters, farmers and the government should form a united front to demand an end to animal cruelty. Not surprisingly the villain that the united front should unite against was the EC commission at Brussels—those cruel foreigners.

There are plenty of things worth getting passionate about, and lots of real problems to protest against. Every day human beings are thrown out of work, made homeless or killed in wars. Every single one of them is more deserving of our support than a whole species of the animal kingdom.

Five years after the fall of Stalinism, Eastern Europe is neither marching forwards to a prosperous future, nor retreating back into an atavistic past. Just returned from a tour of the region, Adam Eastman reports from the political vacuum of the East

A hole in the heart of Europe

The old Eastern bloc is undergoing a successful transformation to a modern market economy. Some may be getting there faster than others, but with continued political will they will all get there in the end.' So says the optimist.

'The crumbling of the old Eastern bloc has unleashed the frightening potential of a region always uniquely self-destructive. Centuries-old bureaucratic inertia and fierce ethnic nationalisms have reared their ugly heads once more to prevent these countries becoming just like any other part of Europe.' So says the pessimist.

Anyone who cares to see the area for themselves will find that neither of the popular verdicts on Eastern Europe five years since the end of the old regimes bears much relation to reality.

If there had been the miraculous transformation promised by the optimists, it would be difficult to even see it past late afternoon. Bratislava, capital of newly formed Slovakia and a mere 60km from cosmopolitan Vienna, has hardly any street lighting. It is even worse in the Romanian capital Bucharest. There are simply no funds to pay for such public amenities, and the situation can only deteriorate in many East European cities.

Any dealings with the state bureaucracy confirm that insufficient wealth has been generated to transform the old ways of doing things. Working for the state—as teacher, doctor or civil servant—is to be avoided at all costs. Witness the glamorous hostess on one of Hungary's top game shows—a qualified doctor who finds it more lucrative to spin the wheels of fortune. Or the top academic at a Russian university, so poor he has had to type his latest book by hand—twice, because he cannot even afford to photocopy. Waiting on tables offers better rewards than the socially useful professions.

Smugglers and pirates

It can still take years to get a phone. Getting work permits is a bureaucratic nightmare. Greasing palms remains the surest path to success—especially if it's with hard currency. New businesses spend their energies trying to avoid the enormous taxes the state attempts to levy. Meanwhile enterprising individuals attempt to levy their own taxes from smugglers. Many people try to make a living by buying cheap and selling dear—frequently crossing borders in the process—and hoodlums extract a percentage. Czechs, Slovaks and Russians cross into Poland to

pick up cheaper goods (Poles flock to Germany for theirs). This racket recently caused a diplomatic incident as Polish police stormed a train full of Russians where war had broken out between gangs and traders. The Russians cancelled a state visit in protest over the heavy-handed treatment meted out by the Polish authorities.

Of course life is not like the wild west for most East Europeans, but the burgeoning 'industry' of smuggling is not too far removed from the hand-to-mouth existence experienced by most ordinary people. Life is chaotic and unpredictable for everyone.

Although unemployment is not statistically any worse than in more advanced European states (in the Czech Republic it is only around three per cent), this is because the state has to continue to subsidise much of industry—for example by allowing massive debts to remain unpaid. If the debt was to be called in, much of the economy would simply collapse. So there are jobs of a sort, but the wages bear little relation to the prices of goods in the shops. The struggle is not so much to find a job, but to string together enough poorly paid ones to eke out a living. Nobody knows whether this will still be possible in



Street life in the Czech Republic

six months or a year, so everyone lives in fear and insecurity—like Britain, but worse.

If proper work is hard to come by, so too is shelter. As in the past, people have to wait for the grandparents to die in order to get a flat—otherwise the newly weds face a future with the in-laws. With property prices in a city like Budapest frequently higher than London (while wages are significantly less), buying a new flat is simply out of the question for most.

The trappings of the past live on in different ways. A Hungarian woman I met is still locked in a battle with the local council, not to get her drains fixed, but to have the name of her road changed. Sick of the sniggers over living in 'Young Workers Street', the council is 'sympathetic' but claiming poverty even for a couple of new road signs.

Eastern Europe is not so much a land of free market opportunity as one where life is dominated by day-to-day survival. Life is like here only more so—everybody is atomised and insecure. This is clear from the collapse of any collective or public institutions. Never mind trade unions or political parties, nobody even goes to football matches any more. Two 'local derbies' I attended in the Czech and

Slovak Republics were about as tense and passionate as a vicar's tea party. Both Slovan v Inter Bratislava and Sparta Prague v the woeful Bohemians had about 7000 people watching. Most of the excitement came from the lone police Alsatian. In Hungary it is even worse—the game that was once the major source of collective national pride has pretty much collapsed as it is too much of a distraction from making ends meet.

Mysterious gangs

The breakdown of public life is also evident in the privatised obsession with crime and personal security. In Warsaw many people now never leave their houses in case they are burgled. In Budapest, you cannot sleep in the better-off districts for the all-night howling of the hundreds of guard dogs. People feel insecure and vulnerable and so exaggerate the threat of crime. It is similar to the 'victim culture' in Britain—except in Eastern Europe, all of society's shortcomings are explained away as the work of gangs who conspire to get what you cannot.

It is worst in Russia where, if anything doesn't work, or if something works too well (for others), the hand of the ubiquitous 'mafia' must be behind it. Further west, the Russian, Ukrainian

or Serbian 'mafias' are the favourite targets. In Budapest flavour of the month is the more exotic Chinese 'mafia'. A Chinese restaurant can only be a front for money laundering in many people's eyes. All that flashy wealth cannot possibly have been made just from cooking food. People persist in believing that the vast unevenness of wealth that has inevitably accompanied the reintroduction of capitalism is some sort of mistake. The flip side is the continuing belief that the streets are paved with gold in the West, where many imagine capitalism works 'properly'—for the benefit of all.

Even where huge resources have been invested, transformation is not thoroughgoing. Five years after the fall of the famous wall, the city of Berlin remains a concrete wasteland with a central island of extravagant shops. Even the power of the new Germany has proved incapable of revolutionising the landscape, despite the fact that this big bad, dirty city is to become the German capital once again. If even the concerted attentions of one of the world's big three economic powers has not yet managed to transform its eastern half, it puts into perspective the capacity of capitalism to regenerate the rest of the East.

The optimists point to the new ▶



Czech Republic as the success story which, under the aggressive Thatcherite leader Vaclav Klaus, is said to have achieved a market economic miracle. But Czech statistical success is largely built on a sleight of hand. Industry continues with hidden subsidies, and high-profile German investments like the Volkswagen partnership with Skoda depend upon Czechs accepting low wages. The success of the beautiful

Most of the new capitalists are old Stalinist apparatchiks who cleaned up on so-called privatisation

capital Prague is built on cheap tourism; some 30 000 young Americans have taken up residence and thousands more Germans flock there throughout the year. Czechs feel good about their 'success' only in comparison to the decay further east. Most Czechs still celebrate the senseless break with Slovakia as it allows them to concentrate German favours in their own hands. But winning the scraps on offer while others starve hardly constitutes success, especially as the Czechs' fate is now entirely bound up with a Germany that they so love to hate.

That analysts can laud the Czech Republic is testimony only to the superficial definition of prosperity today. Britain's fortunes are now largely measured by the degree of consumer confidence; if a few new washing machines and satellite dishes get sold, it's a boom. With this sort of reasoning, which ignores the nuts and bolts of real investment and production, it is hardly surprising that the cheap glitter of tourist revenue and smart shops can be seen as signs of successful transformation in Eastern Europe. That reflects the woeful state of economic thinking more than any real economic development.

Privatisation scam

None of this should suggest that all of Eastern Europe has simply become a wasteland or a colony. BMWs and Mercedes can be seen on the streets of every East European city, and they are not all driven by Germans. So where does the money come from?

Much bitterness centres on these *nouveaux riches*—even the vast majority of Czechs believe they must be crooks. This is not just jealousy, but recognition of the fact that most of the new capitalists are old Stalinist apparatchiks who cleaned up on so-called privatisation. They got rich by selling the factory that

they used to run to themselves for next to nothing.

A Hungarian survey on the nation's new millionaires shows that most are unspecified 'non-private sector'—which means old managers of state enterprises who have creamed off the best state assets. In the private sector the majority of millionaires made their money in construction, not so much by building factories for new industry as exorbitantly priced flash houses for the super rich. Looking for unexploited services and consumer demands remains the goal of other ambitious entrepreneurs. One of the kings of the new 'buy cheap, sell dear' economy is the Hungarian millionaire who made his fortune from goose liver. Bringing in his geese from Romania, he has cornered the market for a favourite Hungarian delicacy. Exploiting such specialised niche markets may make fortunes for a handful of individuals, but is hardly likely to create a solid new class of prosperous capitalists. The limits of this sort of opportunism are already being reached.

Paper tigers

It is now fashionable to speak of a 'Central' or 'East-Central' Europe consisting of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, and an 'Eastern' Europe proper of less advanced states like Bulgaria and the Ukraine. In fact the differences are far less marked than is often made out. The Czech Republic remains as dependent upon state support as the impoverished Ukraine. And while there are important regional differences, they do not signify different stages on a smooth road to capitalist success.

Eastern Europe as a whole is not progressing towards capitalism on the Western model—Latin America is a more appropriate model of what the region can expect from the market. Within Eastern Europe, meanwhile, Albania is not going to reach east German levels of prosperity. The highly uneven character of what development has taken place is here to stay. All the countries have now settled down to differing levels of second-rate capitalism, their fate generally decided according to the degree of interest shown in them by the West, and especially the real master of the region, Germany.

So are the pessimists right? Is the region heading towards a Bosnian-type abyss? So far, the answer is no—because there are no dynamic forces pushing most of these societies anywhere, even to an abyss. Eastern Europe is a political vacuum. Confronted by stagnation and without any focus for change, everyone is minding their own business, preoccupied with survival.

Take Slovakia. According to the

Western press, the new country is typically 'Eastern': a highly unstable state, led by a demagogic populist strongman, the former boxer Vladimir Meciar, elected by uneducated people who hate Western capitalism and the country's sizeable Hungarian minority. Meciar's election victory in October was interpreted as a backward step for the country, a sign of dark days ahead as the Slovaks prepare to turn in on themselves and on any ethnic minorities standing in their way. In fact election day in Slovakia saw no nationalistic masses—ignorant or otherwise. You would not even have known an election was taking place, such was the lack of passion surrounding the country's first independent election. The most exciting thing was Meciar releasing a single with a chorus line about how 'we're all moderate now'. As the only figure of any note he managed to get more votes than anyone else, but weeks later still couldn't assemble a working government. Slovakia is not so much lurching into an insular hardline



nationalism as wandering in a political no-man's land.

Even the much discussed re-election of former Stalinists in Poland and Hungary does not signal a retreat into the past. Certainly it revealed a degree of nostalgia for the bad old days compared to a present that seems even worse, but it was largely a product of the same political vacuum. No groupings other than the former Stalinists seem capable of forging lasting parties, let alone coherent political identities. The old men have not swept the polls by popular acclaim, but won by default. Moreover, voters are well aware—more so it seems than most Western commentators—that these old parties are now as much for the market as any other. The old

Hungarian socialist party is seen by many as the one most capable of proceeding with privatisation. After all, the former Stalinist apparatchiks have proved most adept at milking the system.

Areas like the Hungarian speaking parts of Romania and Slovakia are not on an inexorable descent into civil war. Whether they like each other or not, neighbours are just getting on with the business of survival. Certainly people are more open with their prejudices than in countries like Britain and America, where such hatreds are expressed in code—'underclass', 'muggers' and the like. But there is nothing in the East so powerfully racist as the current French drive against its Arab population. Eastern societies remain too incoherent and weak to mount such a systematic victimisation. The closest thing is the campaign

against illegal immigrants in the Czech Republic and Hungary. But even this is not really driven by powerful demands from within those societies themselves. Rather it is the product of a new policing role they have taken on for Germany, as the front line of 'Fortress Europe'. In exchange for Western favours they are stopping immigrants from further east before they can get near Germany or other EU countries.

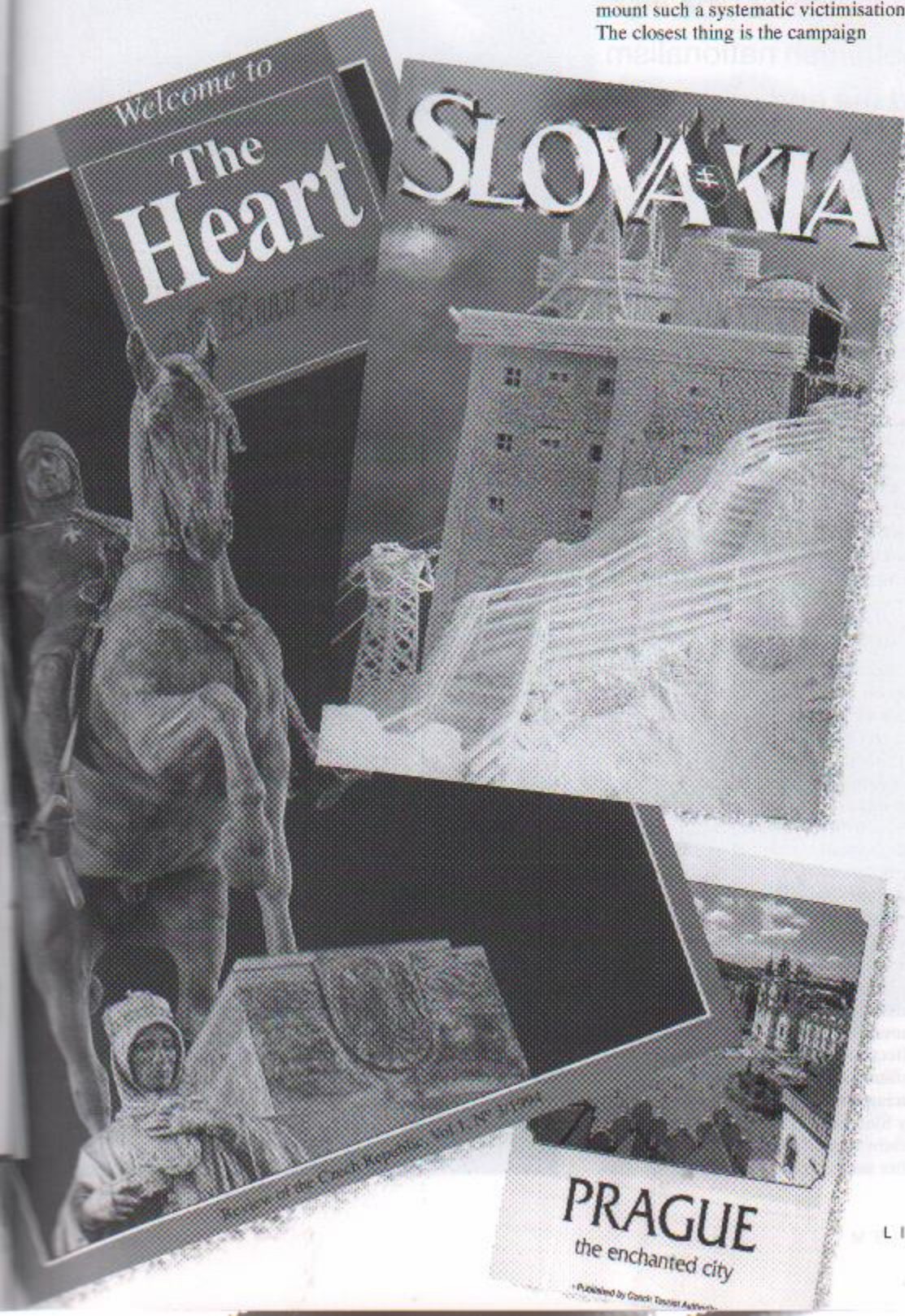
The real danger of conflict comes not from within the East, but from the destabilising effects of external interference. As has been argued consistently in *Living Marxism*, Yugoslavia has been torn apart not by ancient hatreds or resurgent nationalisms, but by the intervention of Western leaders playing their own power games. The same thing could conceivably happen elsewhere at any time; the political vacuum and lack of social cohesion in Eastern countries leaves them highly vulnerable and exposed to the intervention of more powerful players, especially Germany and the USA.

Privileged minority

For instance, one of the talking points of the Slovakian elections was the advert used by a coalition of Hungarian minority groups. It showed the part of Slovakia where they are the majority in the colours of the Hungarian flag—effectively a challenge to the unity of the state. The confidence to stage such a highly provocative display was the result of the firm backing given to minority rights by Western institutions like the Council of Europe and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This meddling in other people's affairs is providing the potential catalyst for violence.

Eastern Europe has become a focus for Western paranoia about what the future might hold. The spectre of Eastern Balkanisation grips the imagination of the Western elites like almost no other, as a warning of things to come closer to home. They are driven to interfere in the affairs of the region in an attempt to fill the dangerous power vacuum and contain the potential problem. Yet their intervention can only serve to make matters worse.

There is now an identifiable pattern of political and sometimes military intervention everywhere from Azerbaijan to Macedonia. It is this sort of self-serving outside interference which can destabilise Eastern Europe—not the mysterious native xenophobia which is imagined to animate people in the region. Europe could yet have more Bosnias on its hands, if the peoples of the East are not left to sort out the problems created by the reintroduction of capitalism for themselves.



Changed utterly: Ireland after the ceasefire

Mick Kennedy argues that the end of the Irish War marks the death of both Irish nationalism and Ulster Unionism—and the end of an era in Britain too

'Gerry Adams...the most innovative republican strategist since the Civil War.' (Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, 'The new politics of the Irish republic', *New Left Review*, No207, September/October 1994, p70)

This barbed accolade for the president of Sinn Fein from two representatives of the academic wing of Irish Stalinism is rich in ironies. The authors invoke the memory of Michael Collins, the republican strategist who signed the treaty with Britain in December 1921 that led to the Civil War in which Collins himself was assassinated by intransigent republicans. They imply a similar historic sell-out by Adams.

Meanwhile the military wing of Irish Stalinism (the old Official IRA, whose weapons were more used in internal feuds than against any external enemy) is now claimed to be defunct, and its political wing (in its latest manifestation as the Democratic Left) has joined the new coalition government in Dublin.

As Gerry Adams visits the White House and Martin McGuinness poses on the steps of Stormont, as former Provisionals talk to the British government and former Officials join the Dublin government, it is clear that a change of historic significance has taken place in Irish republicanism.

The IRA's unilateral ceasefire and Sinn Fein's acceptance that Irish unity is not on the agenda for forthcoming negotiations mark the end of the national question in Irish politics and

Anglo-Irish relations. For the first time in 200 years, the cause of national freedom no longer inspires a significant section of Irish society. The constant threat to the British establishment posed by Irish republicanism, from the Fenians of the 1860s to the IRA and INLA of the 1970s and 1980s, has finally been removed.

The exhaustion of Irish nationalism changes everything in Ireland and in relations between Ireland and Britain. All movements and institutions that have been defined in relation to the national struggle—whether for or against, or in a mediating role—are now put in question.

Themselves alone

In the short term, the IRA ceasefire signals the removal of the major axis of conflict in Ireland—that between the republican movement and the British state—and heralds a period of stability. In the long term, however, the lack of legitimacy of all institutions of class rule in Ireland, North and South—and, to a lesser extent, in Britain too—makes instability on a growing scale inevitable.

The advance of the 'peace process' over the past five years has led to a fundamental change in the character of Irish nationalism. The initiative for this change came from a republican movement suffering the cumulative effects of nearly two decades of military stalemate. The difficulties facing the IRA have been compounded by Sinn Fein's failure to make electoral headway outside its Northern bases after some early successes. ▶





PHOTO: PRESS ASSOCIATION



Though undoubtedly the pressures of war weariness were significant, these were not new and the republican leadership had shown remarkable resilience against such pressures in the past. What was new in the late 1980s was the New World Order inaugurated by the end of the Cold War.

The border appears more as a nuisance to local farmers than as a historic division of the Irish nation

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a demoralising effect on socialist and national liberation movements around the world. It consolidated the impact of years of defeat and strengthened the hand of the forces of capitalism and imperialism. The enhanced authority of the Western powers in relation to nationalist movements has led to a series of settlements being imposed on unfavourable terms in the Middle East, Latin America and southern Africa.

'Parity of esteem'

The emergence of new nationalist movements—particularly in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—based in sections of the old elites and held together by diverse reactionary prejudices provided only a negative example. The fate of such new nationalisms in the bloodbath of the former Yugoslavia has not inspired popular enthusiasm elsewhere. Nationalism as a progressive aspiration stands discredited, and everywhere the masses have retreated from engagement in political activity.

The new global balance of forces intensified the isolation and aloofness of the republican leadership in Ireland. In consequence the IRA experienced growing difficulty in securing arms supplies, and Sinn Fein found itself more politically exposed. In all these circumstances, republican leaders set their sights on coming to some sort of negotiated settlement. In the process they were obliged to lower their horizons to the terms of a deal that could possibly be struck with the British government.

The key shift in republican policy was the redefinition of the movement's goal. Instead of pursuing the objective of Irish independence, which was preserved as an ultimate aspiration, republican strategists now aimed to secure 'parity of esteem' with Unionists and constitutional nationalists. They claimed a place at the negotiating table

as the legitimate representatives of 10-12 per cent of the Northern Ireland electorate. Accepting national unity as a hope for the next century and future generations, in the present Sinn Fein leaders sought negotiations within some framework of 'joint sovereignty' between London and Dublin of the sort that had been evolving since the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985.

Republicanism is dead. It has long been kept alive in the North only in the limited form of the IRA's commitment to the tradition of physical force. The IRA ceasefire, in the wider context of the redefinition of objectives, leaves Sinn Fein as a mere electoral machine, 'the SDLP without guns'. Under John Hume the SDLP has led the way in redefining the objectives of the Northern nationalists in cultural and economic terms. As Sinn Fein emerges to represent the poorer Catholic areas, the SDLP can continue to press the interests of the ascendant Catholic middle classes. If Adams is to be recognised as 'Mr Ten Per Cent', Hume is happy to step forward as 'Mr Twenty Per Cent'.

The demise of Irish nationalism also has important consequences for the other side of the divide. It removes the historic justification for Unionism—its commitment to defend the Union against the nationalist threat. The slogan 'No surrender' no longer means much when the Union is not under attack.

Ulster loyalists traditionally define themselves by their loyalty to the English Crown. The recent descent of the royal family into marital scandal and public disrepute does little to sustain the loyalty of any of the Queen's subjects, least of all those of a puritanical Protestant persuasion. Economic and social trends such as the destruction of local manufacturing have undermined the cohesion of the Unionist community, just as the policies of the British government, from the imposition of direct rule to the Anglo-Irish agreement, have alienated its politicians.

Sold a PUP

The Unionist alliance is crumbling. The political movements that have emerged out of the loyalist paramilitaries—the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) out of the UDA and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) out of the UVF—have distinguished themselves from the mainstream Unionist parties by their openness towards talks with Sinn Fein, given the republican movement's ceasefire and its abandonment of the goal of Irish unity.

The major casualty within the Unionist camp is Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party. Though for 30 years the loudest voice of

Ulster Unionism, Paisley suffered badly from the failure of his campaign against the Anglo-Irish agreement and has misread the changing mood of popular loyalism over recent months. His synthesis of evangelical Protestantism and proletarian Unionism increasingly appears mired in the past. Paisley's theatrical defiance of British initiatives evidently attracts less approval among Northern Protestants and supporters of the UDP/PUP are openly critical of his hostility towards talks with Sinn Fein.

Pyrrhic victory

In Dublin the chattering classes have been proclaiming the 'end of Civil War politics' for some years; the collapse of the nationalist project means that the political movements inaugurated at the birth of the Free State really have reached the end of the road. The disintegration of the coalition led by Albert Reynolds and Dick Spring in December and the emergence of a new coalition, united only by the desperation of all the parties to avoid facing the electorate, reveals the scale of the crisis of legitimacy gripping the Dublin elite (see 'A national disgrace', January 1995).

The very division of Ireland into North and South is likely to become a less salient feature of Irish political life. Introduced as a device for dealing with the threat of nationalist insurgency, partition was the form through which Britain exercised domination over Ireland as a whole. But the end of nationalism makes it possible to roll back the wheel of history: if the nationalist movement no longer exists, what is the importance of partition? The border now appears more as a nuisance to local farmers than as a historic division of the Irish nation and its people.

There is now no immediate obstacle to the implementation of the old Thatcherite plan of 'rolling devolution' of governmental powers to an assembly in the North. The suggestion, attributed to Irish president Mary Robinson, that the South might ultimately consider rejoining the Commonwealth (which it left upon the declaration of the 'Irish republic' in 1948), indicates the trend towards more indirect methods of British intervention and influence in Ireland as a whole. The absence of a nationalist challenge means that there is no need for the sort of direct methods of domination that Ireland has experienced in the past.

From the perspective of the British government the demise of Irish nationalism would appear to mark a historic victory. Indeed the republican movement's effectively unconditional surrender has allowed John Major to pose as the great peacemaker. His success in Ireland, when he

numerous predecessors have failed, has provided a badly needed boost to his domestic prestige.

Yet the British establishment has had to pay a potentially heavy price for Major's Irish triumph. The high-profile role played by Washington and Dublin in securing a settlement in Ireland indicates Britain's diminished status in the New World Order. The very fact that the resolution of the conflict in Ireland is discussed in the same terms as the settlements in the Middle East and South Africa reflects imperial decline.

In the past, Britain, as one of the major Western powers, enjoyed a free hand to sort out its own colonial problems. Now it is seen in the same light as third rank powers, like Israel and South Africa, which are obliged to accept big power interference in their internal affairs. The depiction of Reynolds as a politician on a par with Major marks another humiliation for Britain. No previous Dublin leader ever enjoyed such international recognition, least of all in relation to the affairs of Northern Ireland, still a province of the United Kingdom.

Without interest

For years the British elite has depended heavily upon its image as a global power to boost its authority in the face of economic and social decay at home. The loss of status symbolised by the increased involvement of Washington, Brussels and Dublin in the affairs of Northern Ireland can only exacerbate the crisis of political authority in Whitehall.

Furthermore, in luring the republican movement into accepting a negotiated settlement, the British government did, in the Downing Street declaration, go some way towards putting the future of the Union between Britain and Northern Ireland in question. Though this has been widely misinterpreted as signalling a long-anticipated British desire to withdraw from Northern Ireland, it did indicate a willingness to question constitutional structures whose integrity is vital to the stability of the British state itself.

Ulster Unionist leader James Molyneux expressed his bemusement at Sinn Fein's interpretation of the passage in the declaration in which Britain expresses 'no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland', observing that either they had 'misread' it or somebody had 'conned' them (*Guardian*, 15 October 1994):

'They took that as a signal that "they're going to get out, Northern Ireland's going to be their last colony". But that's not what it meant. It was a statement of fact. Of course they have

no strategic interest, the Cold War is ended. What they were saying, to the Americans in particular and the United Nations audience, was "look, we're not a colonial power, we're not holding Northern Ireland down against its own will, if they decide they want to go, all right, we'll let them go".

'And that phrase worked over there. But it didn't mean what Adams seems to have chosen it to mean, that it is the declaration that England would get out as soon as it could be conveniently arranged.'

For his part, Molyneux was confident that 'Northern Ireland's long-term future is now safely within the Union'.

Molyneux's interpretation of the meaning of the Downing Street declaration and the motivation behind



it is certainly more accurate than the wishful thinking of Sinn Fein. But he underestimates the objective consequences of the British government distancing itself from the Union, whatever the subjective motivations of British politicians and civil servants. It calls the unity and legitimacy of the British state into question in a way that would never have been considered before, and risks starting a destabilising dynamic which the ruling British elite would find hard to control.

Major's offer of a referendum within Northern Ireland on the outcome of talks reinforces this problem: the integrity of the British state is implicitly placed in the hands of Northern Ireland voters. However confident Major might be about the outcome, this is a dangerous gesture. The immediate response of Scottish nationalists has been to demand the same: as Tom Nairn has observed, 'the Majorites imagine that they can do it without repercussions elsewhere

in the existing Union. This belief is preposterous...In the Union as it will be after the implementation of the Downing Street declaration, both Scotland and Wales can put a devastatingly strong case for national assemblies of their own' (*Guardian*, 20 September 1994).

The problem which the Irish question potentially poses for the British authorities no longer has much to do with anything that happens in Ireland; indeed it is the end of that threat which has allowed the 'peace process' to take off. The key factor in the future is likely to be the relationship of the Irish issue to the political crisis within Britain itself. The loss of legitimacy of key establishment institutions—the monarchy, the Church of England, parliament, the major parties—makes the integrity of the United Kingdom more rather than less important for the authority of the British ruling class, at the very moment when the Irish peace process has publicly put it in question.

In the short term, the demise of Irish nationalism may lead to a period of stability. The decline in paramilitary activity since the Downing Street declaration, and the fact that the IRA ceasefire has held for some months, suggest that the exhaustion of the contenders provides some scope for the politicians to claim success for their initiatives. It will take some time for the disintegrative momentum unleashed by the collapse of the nationalist project to work its way through the various movements and institutions.

Expose the truth

Because of its proximity and history of emigration as well as of nationalist conflict, Ireland is never going to disappear as an issue in British politics. Nor is it going to become just another colonial or imperial issue. Equally, however, Ireland is not going to occupy the sort of central significance it has over the past 25 years.

Within Britain, it is not just the ruling class which is being forced to reconsider its attitude towards the Irish question. The profound changes of recent times must also have important implications for those of us who have campaigned in support of the fight for Irish freedom over the past 25 years. That project is now at an end; it is impossible to build an anti-imperialist movement in solidarity with a non-existent liberation struggle. The more limited aim today must be to expose the truth behind the peace process, and to develop a critique of the new forms of domination in Ireland. A more developed form of anti-imperialist activity must await the emergence of new forms of struggle in Ireland and in Britain. ●

The UN: new dictators of Iraq

Hugh Livingstone and Kayode Olafimihan from the Edge Gallery recently visited Iraq to gather material for an exhibition investigating the effect of UN sanctions. This is what they found

I have seen somebody operated on without anaesthetic, seen doctors using ordinary cloth thread to sew up wounds. Is this the human rights they are talking about?' Captain Rifai, a former Iraqi Airways pilot, grounded by United Nations sanctions against his country, was asking the question that most of the 18m Iraqi people demand of the UN: what about *our* rights?

Economic sanctions were imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, and remained in force after the Allied forces had devastated Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. UN Resolution 687 says they will only be lifted when Iraq meets the terms of the ceasefire. In fact Iraq has now met most of these conditions, by recognising Kuwait and cooperating in the destruction and monitoring of its own 'weapons of mass destruction'. The USA and Britain have responded by moving the goalposts; in response to those, such as the French, who favour a *rapprochement* with the West's old ally Saddam Hussein, Washington and Whitehall emphasise that sanctions are now necessary to restore human rights in Iraq.

Bill Clinton's national security adviser, Antony Lake, says the USA will promote UN resolutions which 'reflect the international consensus in support of an end to Saddam's repression of the Iraqi people. Working closely with UN agencies and international human rights organisations, we are calling attention to the plight of Iraqi citizens who have been brutalised by this regime and insist on having human rights monitors inside the country.' ('Confronting backlash states', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994)

Yet the paradox of sanctions is that the very people that they are purported to help are the ones who suffer under them. The UN sanctions are a stranglehold from which all of the population, especially the most vulnerable, suffer. Iraq can no longer either export its own resources, or import what it needs.

Most medicines are supposed to

be exempt from sanctions, but because Iraqis are not allowed to export oil they cannot even pay for basic foodstuffs—70 per cent of which used to be imported—let alone medicine. Even the country's own agricultural resources are being wasted because chemical fertilisers and pesticides and farm equipment cannot be imported.

Only government rations prevent mass starvation, but these contain no proteins and only provided 70 per cent of energy requirements even before the government's recent 40 per cent cut in provision due to a bad harvest—no 'natural disaster', but starvation by UN sanctions. To meet the shortfall, Iraqis have to buy scarce food on the open market at massively inflated prices.

'This is sanctions...'

Unicef estimates food prices have rocketed by over 650 per cent in the past year alone while government employees' salaries have only increased by 50-100 per cent in more than four years since sanctions were imposed ('Impact of reduction in food ration on the most vulnerable children and women', Unicef, October 1994). During our visit the average monthly salary of a civil servant was around 3000 Iraqi Dinars; 30 eggs cost 1250 ID, and a kilo of meat around 1500 ID. Most families we met could only get enough food for a week to 10 days from their monthly income.

Many families have sold off their possessions to survive. The first to go is usually jewellery, wedding gifts and family heirlooms. Furniture, carpets, TV's and radios follow. We met families, living in houses bare of furniture, who have resorted to selling internal doors, window frames from the upper stories and bricks from planned house extensions, simply to feed themselves and buy medicine.

Drugs are now so scarce that many are dying of the kind of curable diseases that doctors thought had been eradicated. According to Donald Acheson, UK Chief Medical Officer, 'Iraq had comprehensive health services with modern and well-equipped hospitals in

the main centres' (*British Medical Journal*, February 1992). No longer. Under the sanctions, pharmacies are desperate for even the most basic medicines—anti-biotics, electrolyte salts for diarrhoea, painkillers, antiseptics, and anaesthetics. Hospital wards, many inoperative through lack of equipment, spare parts and staff, are now pools of infection rather than places of healing. Even insecticides to kill the swarms of flies that collect around chronically ill children are unavailable.

As we visited Basra Childhood and Maternity Hospital, a two-year old boy had just died from gastro-enteritis. His family were unable to feed the child properly to fight off infection, or to obtain the simple drugs required. 'This is sanctions—this dead young man', Dr Bassam told us as he signed the death certificate.

In the Basra neighbourhood where the child lived the streets are awash with raw sewage, as barefoot children try to shovel the stinking sludge into the collapsed drainage system. The local pumping station stopped working due to lack of spare parts. There is no fresh water in the area. Basra's ground water is highly saline and the water treatment facilities were largely destroyed during the Gulf War. Those that survived barely work due to lack of spares and basic materials: water treatment chemicals such as chlorine and potassium cannot be imported by order of the UN.

The biggest killer

Infant mortality rates have risen nearly sevenfold since the Gulf War and the imposition of sanctions. A hundred and eighty thousand children under five have perished due to the embargo; a hundred and fifty thousand under-fives are treated for nutritional diseases every month (figures supplied by Iraqi Red Crescent). 'Dehydration due to diarrhoea is the biggest killer of children in Iraq; pneumonia is the second biggest killer of children', according to Thomas Ekvall of Unicef. In fact the biggest killer of Iraqi children is the sanctions imposed by the United Nations. ►



The victim of a natural disaster? No. This child is starving because the United Nations Security Council will not allow his government to import the food and medicines he needs to live

PHOTOS: HUGH LIVINGSTONE AND TAHAR AHMED



Children sweep effluent into the collapsing sewers of Basra (above) while the United Nations' aerial receives pictures from the scores of spy cameras planted in Iraqi factories (left)

The suffering of ordinary Iraqis living in the shadow of the sanctions does not seem to square with the declared aim of the UN to protect human rights. In fact, 'human rights' has simply become a banner under which the UN Security Council can ride roughshod over the political and economic rights of Iraqis, and subordinate them to a new form of dictatorship.

Ironically, the devastation of Iraqi society at the behest of the UN Security Council is now seen as the reason why Iraqis need the help of the United Nations. There used to be hardly any UN aid personnel in Iraq. Now, thanks to the devastation and blockade of Iraq, UN aid organisations are everywhere. Many see their work as a counter to the repressive consequences of sanctions. But in reality, they are part of the same process of subordinating Iraq to the will of the West. UN aid agencies now have a major say in deciding how the Iraqi people's affairs are run.

To live or die

Unicef staff, increased from 11 to 150 after Desert Storm, control the import of water treatment chemicals and spares for pumping and sewage stations. The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) is in charge of crop spraying from the air. The World Health Organisation (WHO) controls those medicines that fall under sanctions, like Angiseed, a drug for angina which contains a minute amount of explosive ingredient, or radioactive isotopes for medical laboratory use.

The UN aid organisations, whatever those involved may think, are simply an extension of the Security Council's

control of Iraq. The relief organisations now decide what projects to prioritise, who to help—in other words, who will live and who will die in Iraq.

Western governments use aid to shore up their military control of Iraq. Consequently aid for northern Iraq, where the UN is fostering an alternative government, is easy to come by, but the hunger of southern and central Iraq apparently does not count. Francisco Roque-Castro, director of the World Food Programme in Baghdad, told us that 'the requirements for the northern operation are fully met. However for the central and southern governorates we need about 23000 tonnes and I don't know where it's coming from because the international community has not yet supplied it...the reasons for this are in each capital's strategy'.

British foreign office minister Douglas Hogg recently wrote that 'our quarrel is with the Iraqi regime, not the long-suffering population' (letter to Brian Sedgemoor MP, 21 October 1994). Hogg claims that the catastrophic effect of the embargo is not due to the sanctions themselves, but is the fault of the Iraqi regime. 'The Security Council exceptionally offered to allow Iraq to sell \$1.6 billion of oil, with the proceeds used to compensate victims of the Gulf War and supply aid to Iraq...The Iraqi regime refused the offer...and is now cynically exploiting the suffering of those it refused to help.'

Hogg's supposed \$1.6 billion concession to Iraq is a convenient fig leaf for the UN blockade. Resolution 706, allowing Iraq to sell that amount of oil, was adopted by the Security Council in response to reports



The spacious offices of the United Nations Children's organisation Unicef (above opposite) and the classroom in the Ak-Rameen Primary School in Hilla which sits three shifts to cram 3500 children into a school made for 600 (above)

of 'pre-famine' conditions in Iraq. But instead of alleviating the suffering, the UN has only tried to shift the blame for it on to the Iraqi regime.

Under 706, Iraq is required to give \$1.6 billion of its oil to the UN. The UN would then sell the oil, depositing the money into its own ESCROW account. A third of the money raised would go to oil-rich Kuwait as 'compensation'. From what remains, the UN would fund its own bloated administration as marketing fees, and the cost of maintaining its own arms monitoring programme in Iraq. Only what is left after all of this would be used by the UN to buy food, medicines and other humanitarian aid for Iraq. The UN will then distribute this aid within Iraq itself, bypassing existing government structures, and taking out the costs associated with this operation.

Mass destruction

We asked both government officials and UN aid organisations about this windfall. 'I believe that approximately half of this money could be used for humanitarian purposes, the rest would go to compensation to Kuwait and cover the UN's costs in Iraq', said Unicef's Thomas Ekvall. Pressed as to whether that amount would be enough, he told us that 'the food rationing system, until the recent reductions, was costing \$100m a month, so half of \$1.6 billion won't go that far'.

Before the Gulf War Iraq annually imported \$500m of drugs and medical equipment and \$3 billion of food, paid for with revenues from the second largest oil reserves in the world. Iraq's oil income also funded infrastructure

developments, healthcare and a social welfare system to rival any developing nation. The current impoverishment of Iraq is not some natural disaster, but a politically imposed state of affairs, deliberately engineered by the West and rubber-stamped by the UN.

If the UN was seriously concerned to meet the needs of the Iraqi people, it could simply allow Iraq to produce and export its own oil like any other independent nation. By contrast, resolution 706 with its meagre \$1.6 billion allowance is not a serious attempt to ease the suffering of the Iraqi people. It is a political device, designed to establish the principle that only the UN Security Council has the moral authority to run the economy and feed the population. This one-off sale is regarded as a test case, that will allow future 'oil sales' by Iraq and UN aid programmes to be conducted in a manner that denies Iraq any say over its own resources.

Perhaps the UN's subjugation of Iraq is clearest in the weapons monitoring programme, ostensibly set up to stop Iraq developing 'weapons of mass destruction'. The success of UNSCOM—the UN agency charged with the monitoring—has been hailed as a model of how the West can police nuclear proliferation.

The obsession with Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction' is fantastic. During the Gulf War, the Allies killed 180,000 Iraqis for about 100 Allied dead. They used radioactive 'nuclear bullets' made with waste uranium, napalm, fuel-air explosives, cluster bombs, and even bulldozers to bury Iraqi troops alive in their trenches. Since Desert Storm,

the Western Allies have devastated Iraq with their deadliest 'weapon of mass destruction'—the sanctions which have killed more than the war itself. Yet all of this is forgotten as attention focuses on the alleged threat posed by Iraq's largely fictional arsenal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The powers which declared war on Iraq, and continue it through sanctions, have set themselves up as peace monitors.

Spy cameras

The UN monitoring programme not only restricts Iraq's ability to make weapons. It means that Iraq is no longer allowed to develop its own industry. The UN has created what one of the engineers installing the system described as 'the most intrusive monitoring system ever devised'. All of Iraq's hi-tech industry is now carefully monitored—even breweries are watched. A battery of new technologies are being employed by the monitoring team, from satellite photos to infra-red radars and seismic sensors. Around 170 video cameras beam their pictures back to a 300-foot tower at UN headquarters in Baghdad's former Canal Hotel. Air sensors sniff the air at factories, soil samples are taken, all equipment capable of precision machining is tagged by UNSCOM—its specifications and location noted and checked.

Spot checks without notice are common as UN inspectors, backed up by US Awacs planes, helicopter into any factory they choose, sealing it off while they conduct their search. It is an operation which, so far, the UN regards as very successful. 'We have identified Iraq's missiles, we have shipped out ▶



the nuclear material, and we've identified and destroyed the chemical weapons programmes', we were told by an UNSCOM spokesman at the Canal Hotel. Even if sanctions are eventually lifted, UNSCOM will still be monitoring all of Iraq's imports.

UNSCOM admits that no 'weapons of mass destruction' exist in Iraq today. Yet the UN refuses to acknowledge

Under the banner of human rights the United Nations has built a dictatorship

officially that Iraq has complied with UN resolutions 687, 707, and 715 which give UNSCOM its intrusive powers. Despite admitting that the monitoring regime is now up and running, UNSCOM are still not satisfied. 'You are right to say that it's a potentially endless process. But we need a complete picture of what Iraq did in the past.' UNSCOM has set itself the impossible task of knowing everything about Iraq's past industrial programme, whether military or civilian, before sanctions can be lifted.

Iraqis are being used as guinea pigs for a sophisticated system of surveillance and control, under the pretext of a UN weapons monitoring programme. 'This thing is unique in terms of arms control', we were told by UNSCOM, 'so we are a testing-ground and a lot of people are looking at the results for future reference. A lot of these techniques are new, a lot are involving very new, up-to-date equipment—there is a lot of help from different governments around the world. It is essentially a whole combination of new technologies being put to the test'.

Like caged animals

Through enforcing sanctions, monitoring Iraqi industry, and dictating its borders, the UN Security Council is imposing a new mandate system on Iraq. Today's mandate may be very different from those of the 1920s, when the imperial powers justified their control of the Middle East as a holding operation until the natives were civilised enough to rule themselves. But it is just as coercive and corrupt as the old colonial system.

Wherever you look in Iraq, the UN treats Iraqis like caged animals. In the south of the country, the border with Kuwait has been redrawn by a UN committee in old-fashioned colonial style. Kuwait now has an extra 400 square miles of territory, including Iraqi oil fields from which it now reportedly extracts about 14 000 barrels

of oil per day. The port of Umm Qasr, formerly Iraq's main seaport and naval base has been split in two. Kuwait has demolished everything that is now on its side of the border—homes, a school, a nursery. Nearly 200 Iraqi families whose homes ended up 'in Kuwait' were told by the UN border guards that they had to move out, with no notice. They lost their homes, farms, furniture, livelihoods. They now live in a housing estate that overlooks the fortifications which Kuwait built over their former homes—a 160-mile long embankment and trench that can only be crossed by UNIKOM, the UN 'peacekeepers' who patrol the border.

This Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), where all military personnel and vehicles are banned five kilometres inside Kuwait and 10km inside Iraq, has been hailed as an instrument for peace and stability. Yet the new border is neither demilitarised nor stable. The DMZ is patrolled by UNIKOM, supported by a mechanised infantry battalion from Bangladesh known as BANGBAT. The ban on military personnel and weapons does not of course apply to them.

Silver Mercedes

UNIKOM is well aware of the contempt most Iraqis hold it in. Although its base and offices are at Umm Qasr in Iraq, all the UN personnel live in Kuwait City, the other side of the border and a lot further away than the Iraqi city of Basra.

In fact, most Iraqis we spoke to resented the entire UN operation. Whether military or relief, UN agencies are seen as either the direct or indirect cause of Iraqi suffering. Indeed, their very presence is a reminder that Iraqis are suffering while Westerners lord it over them. For all the charitable impulses of some UN humanitarian relief personnel, our abiding memory of the UN offices was one of affluence. Most cars splutter their way around Baghdad with bald tyres, broken headlights, ill-fitting doors and speedometers that don't work. Outside Unicef was parked a row of gleaming silver Mercedes.

The carpeted reception proudly displays the aims of Unicef (Survival, Hope, Development, Respect, Dignity, Equality, Justice, for women and children) along with copies of current affairs magazines and professional journals for visitors to browse through. Yet directly opposite its offices the houses were overcrowded and half-collapsed, while Iraqi doctors were complaining about the lack of medical journals such as *The Lancet* (which Unicef had), and even up-to-date medical textbooks.

Iraq's hospitals are falling apart, and people are demolishing their own homes to buy food; UN offices are

an oasis of air-conditioning, fitted carpets and smart new furniture. Only in UN offices will you see fax machines and personal computers, rather than the elderly telexes and electric typewriters which are shared in government offices.

Only UN personnel are privileged to fly in and out of Iraq today. Everybody else—children, the old, the ill, the poor or government representatives—have to go the hard way. A gruelling drive across the desert to Amman in Jordan that takes at least 16 hours. UN personnel can be flown to Amman within the hour, or to Bahrain in two and a half hours at most. The Iraqi Red Crescent complained bitterly to us that even those needing life-saving medical care outside of Iraq have to drive to Amman.

For many UN personnel, a posting to Iraq is a way to earn a fortune. A secondment to Iraq means that your salary goes straight into your bank account at home, with tax concessions. Living expenses in Iraq are paid out of a Daily Subsistence Allowance. This DSA has recently been cut from \$300 a day, much to the chagrin of many UN staff. Yet the new allowance is still a fortune in Iraq. The collapse of the dinar means that nobody could spend more than \$8 on a day's food.

And while the UN personnel pamper themselves, the UN commission on sanctions decides what is not essential for ordinary Iraqis: tyres for ambulances, toilet cisterns (are they supposed to piss in the rivers?), family photo albums, PVC for rubbish bags, gum for making shoes, window glass for houses. Even burial shrouds have been refused an export licence by the British government.

'No interference'

Under the banners of human rights, the United Nations' operation has built a dictatorship far more onerous than Saddam's regime at its worst; and this new dictatorship is destroying Iraq's future. With whom does the future of Iraq rest: the people of Iraq themselves or the self-proclaimed protectors of human rights?

Dr Zeinab Amer, a junior doctor we met in Baghdad, summed up what many Iraqis said to us, 'I think the people of Iraq want from the West that they have the right to live, they have the right to work, and to build their country without interference from others, that is the only need for our people'.

The authors' exhibition will be on show at the Edge Gallery, 2 The Circle, Queen Elizabeth Street, London SE1 from 13 February 1995. It features photographs by award-winning photojournalist Tom Stoddard, and a video diary of their visit.

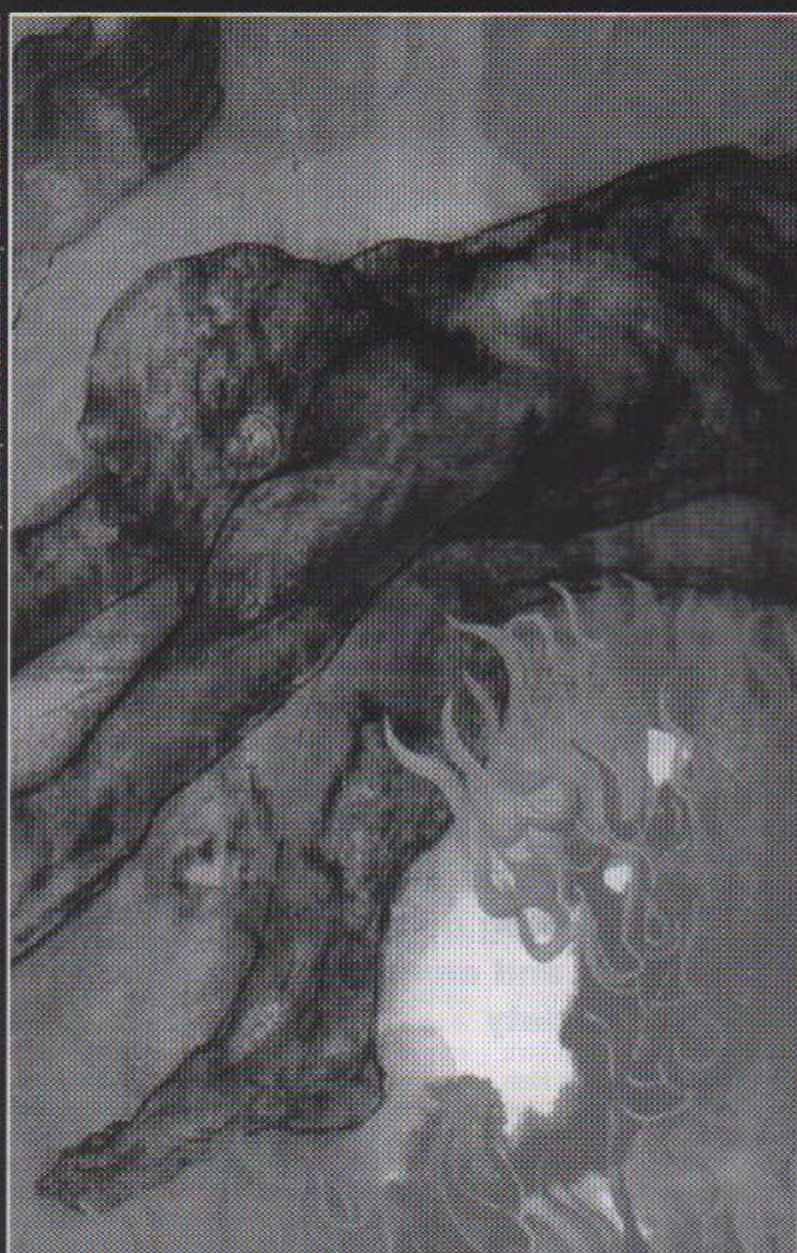
HIROSHIMA THE WEEK

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Members of the Revolutionary Communist Party met in December to discuss perspectives for the period ahead. Pat Roberts presents edited extracts from the main conference report, examining the new political culture of relativism and authoritarianism

Problems of the new

Capitalist society has reached an impasse. The weak inner dynamic of the global economy is matched by the exhaustion of the ruling elite's intellectual and moral capital. Capitalist stagnation has been a fact of life for over two decades. The short economic upturns and the emergence of new technologies cannot compensate for the decline into an era of slump. The stagnation of productive employment reflects the inability of the system to absorb the creative powers of humanity.

Despite all of its difficulties, however, the capitalist system has survived. The starting point of the revolutionary left's analysis has traditionally been the crisis of working class leadership which has prevented a successful challenge to capitalism. However, times have changed, we have entered a new political cycle. The starting point of this new political cycle is the transformation of the crisis of working class leadership into a crisis of humanity. The containment of any threat from the working class has allowed a stagnant system to continue without paying a heavy price. As a result, the costs of capitalist failure are being borne by society as a whole.

The ruling class today has neither the discipline and cohesion which is usually imposed by considerations of the class struggle, nor a dynamic economic base to rely upon. In these circumstances the capitalist elite is far more unstable, as evidenced by the governmental crises which have developed everywhere from Britain and America to France and Japan. Yet, despite its internal weakness, the capitalist class remains the most coherent social force in Britain and internationally. It uses this power recklessly and to sectional advantage. It remains fervently committed to the defence of its self-interest. Indeed the ruling class would rather bring the whole world down than give up any of its privileges.

Because of its social weight, the capitalist class influences developments in wider society. In particular today, its own internal crisis has had a major impact on political and cultural life. The ideological exhaustion of the ruling elites has helped to create widespread confusion, and to disorient society as a whole. Uncertainty and a lack of belief have become characteristic features of the post-Cold War era.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, many predicted the rise of old-fashioned right-wing politics. In the event, reactionary ideas have become dominant, but not in the expected form. The defeat of the left and the labour movement has not been followed by a self-consciously triumphalist bourgeois offensive. To be sure, for a period at the end of the Cold War there was the occasional outburst of triumphalist rhetoric. But the attempt to assert the End of History and the campaign to celebrate nakedly capitalist values soon lost momentum, as political incoherence and economic recession took over.

Unable positively to affirm the legitimacy of its rule, the capitalist elite has instead turned to preying on the fears and anxieties of society. In the absence of any opposition, it is able continually to re-present its own internal problems as those of society in general. So the stagnation of the capitalist economy can be presented as society coming up against 'natural' limits to its development. The most influential reactionary ideas today do not seek to celebrate the achievements of capitalism, but instead emphasise the limits of what can be done. Instead of a traditional language of elitist class domination, there is a new vocabulary which emphasises environmental, moral, medical and other non-social factors in order to justify the perpetuation of the status quo.

The capitalist class continually seeks to widen its social base by harnessing the concerns of the middle classes to its survival strategy. To this end, it is preying upon the anxiety of today's insecure middle classes. Instead of a positive promotion of the capitalist system, the ruling elites feel more comfortable with lowering expectations of what is possible. They are encouraging a sense of risks and limits that require people to play safe in everyday life and not to take chances.

Uncertainty and compromise are the main weapons used to further bourgeois ideology in the present. The system is defended not by the

promotion of specific principles, but by eschewing any fixed positions at all. Ruling class incoherence invites the same response from the rest of society. It is as if they are saying, 'If we have nothing to believe in then it is because there is nothing worth believing in'. Liberal anti-extremist sentiment and avant-garde cynicism provide the language in which such agnosticism can be peddled.

A system of politics based on uncertainty and compromise can help to maintain stability by fuelling a climate of social paralysis. However, such an approach cannot provide any positive endorsement of the system. It cannot provide the ruling class with legitimacy nor with a sense of solidarity. The reactionary programme of highlighting limits can disarm critics, but without boosting the elite's authority. At the level of politics, the problems of capitalism continue

to be experienced as a crisis of legitimacy, in which no party or government can command public authority.

As a result of the suspension of the traditional forms of class struggle, the legitimacy crisis is not experienced directly. Instead the way it is experienced is shaped by the low expectations and the

consciousness of limits that prevail in society. In other words, because there is no expectation or demand for an alternative, there is no real pressure on the capitalist class to account for its actions. A succession of failed policies and politicians is disposed of without any fundamental explanation of what is wrong with the system being demanded or offered. Since little is expected of politics in the first place, such failures are not seen to touch any essential principles of how society is organised.

The consciousness of limits inevitably narrows the terrain of politics. As a sense of limits is institutionalised, so the sphere of political engagement becomes narrowed. For instance, it is now routine for political thinkers of both the left and the right to declare that the state has little power to influence events in the new global



political cycle

environment. Since capitalist politics is inseparable from its use of the state, the consequences of such 'globalist' conclusions are far reaching. Calling into question the effectiveness of the state represents the renunciation of any positive interventionist role for government. What remains is a diminished sphere for political engagement where big principles appear to have no practical merit. The consciousness of limits leads to a pragmatic acceptance that it is only worth attempting what appears to be realistically possible today, and that there is no point taking risks or trying something new.

Both the movements that call themselves left and right have accepted the pragmatism that explicitly rejects political principles. The elevation of narrow electoral calculations and the avoidance of debate and controversy contribute to the creation of a uniquely depoliticised political arena. Instead of a clash of views, all sides tend to avoid being held to account for any principle. This fear of taking a stand leads them either directly or indirectly in a relativist direction. Everyone has commented on the absence of principle in the rehauled Blair-led Labour Party. However, the right is no less spineless. It too is prepared to sell everything for a few potential votes. So we see sections of the American religious right prepared to play down their hostility to abortion—the centrepiece of their programme—for the sake of electoral considerations.

This relativist sentiment influences everyone. The rejection of principles and condemnation of all 'extremes' ultimately leads to the abandonment of any strongly held views. In this environment all kinds of diverse sentiments can flourish, and very few conventions and traditional values are immune from being altered or renegotiated. And if society has no non-negotiable principles, then elementary values guiding individual action also become open to debate. A lack of political direction at the societal level goes hand in hand with confusion and disarray at the level of the individual. Major debates concerning family life and parenting reflect the extent of uncertainty about the most elementary forms of human conduct today.

To sum up these trends: stagnation at the level of capitalist production leads to an absence of dynamism in society and helps shape a consciousness of limits. The consequence is social passivity and an escape into the mindset of relativism. All of which is pointing towards the creation of a dangerous political culture today.

Relativism consistently expresses the downgrading of rationality and the upgrading of anti-human practices; if all opinions are equally valid, then ignorance and insight are of equal value. In ideological terms, relativism leaves matters unresolved and issues unclarified. It shifts the focus of attention away from the totality of social arrangements towards arbitrary matters of individual concern. That is why the ruling class—albeit with reservations—is prepared to accommodate to a relativist standpoint. The ruling class still formally upholds a system of absolute standards, but in practice it is prepared to negate any of its values for pragmatism's sake—witness the recent ideological retreats on everything from 'Back to basics' to the free market.

The pragmatic renunciation of principle makes it possible to contain contradictions and conflicts in political life, and to render the old left/right divide meaningless. It provides for a de facto system of compromises which is attractive to all sides of the political spectrum. The convergence of right with left is not a total one. It reflects the fact that, as the right becomes more relativistic, the left becomes more drawn towards authoritarian solutions.

For example, a recent discussion among liberal academics about the importance of pluralism and diversity readily endorsed the notion that paid work was only one 'lifestyle', and should not be 'privileged' over others. It is not hard to see how the ruling class could seek to mobilise this relativistic apology for unemployment in order to reinforce the legitimacy of their system. In this way, the assertion of liberal lifestyles and individual rights—such as the right not to join a trade union—have become part of a system of social regulation.

One of the most fashionably relativistic demands of today, supported by everybody from protesters against the Criminal Justice Act to gay rights activists, is for 'the right to be different'. This sounds radical and egalitarian. But, in fact, the right to be different represents the negation of all rights.

Real rights have to represent an inclusive, non-discriminatory, common standard to which all are entitled. That is the only way to give any genuine meaning to equality. By contrast, an insistence on difference denies that there are common standards, and as such represents the negation of equality.

The celebration of difference, presented as a sensitive appreciation of individual and cultural heterogeneity, is really a primitive worship of parochialism over universality. However egalitarian the intention might be, in a society run on capitalist lines, the rejection of common standards of equality inevitably points to the defence of hierarchy. The right to be different might be put forward as a liberal defence of the travellers' lifestyle; but it also implies the right of the rich to defend their privileged lifestyles as a form of 'difference'.

The absence of a common standard in society leads to a more arbitrary form of capitalist rule. It is a form of rule not necessarily associated with the political right. Indeed right-wing values to do with faith, dogma or tradition invariably become casualties of the contemporary intellectual climate of uncertainty. However, at the same time, the domination of the capitalist elite over society can be expressed in other, apparently oppositional, ideas and vocabularies.

The convergence of traditional moralism with liberal feminism illustrates the dynamic discussed above. John Major's 'Back to basics' has proved to be an embarrassing reminder of the establishment's inability to act on its principles. In response, the authorities have had to accept the view that there are now families of ▶

If all opinions are equally valid, then ignorance and insight are of equal value

different sorts, and not just The Family. But this does not mean that the ruling class has given up on the idea of disciplining the masses. Instead, it has sought to borrow more relevant contemporary forms of discipline from its opponents. That is why the authorities are now happy to allow strict feminist and other PC codes of conduct to flourish at all levels of society. The PC rules of etiquette are no less relevant for the purpose of plebian control than the old-fashioned sanctions.

It is important to grasp the dangerous consequences of the new political culture. Relativism, diversity and ideological compromise should not be interpreted as a form of soft liberalism. Relativism does not really mean that you can do your own thing in your own space. Nor does it mean tolerance. On the contrary, it means that anything with which you disagree potentially constitutes *harassment*, and as such must be censored or contained in some way in order to protect you.

The greater the diversity, the more rules are required to regulate life. Greater diversity multiplies potential areas of conflict. Within the family, children's rights contend with a mother's right to say no to a father untutored in the ways of parenting. Such a wide range of conflicts continually invites intervention and regulation from outside agencies of one sort or another.

Through offering the authorities an open invitation to intervene in and regulate our affairs, relativism provides the intellectual underpinning for what we have termed the new authoritarianism. Relativism is ranged against radical opinions and critical thought. In this context, the affirmation of deeply held views becomes an invitation to ridicule, marginalisation or, in some cases, repression. The ferocity with which feminists and others on the 'left' now demand repression and censorship, and their cavalier dismissal of the right to free speech, are testimony to the threat which the new authoritarianism represents.

One of the distinctive features of the new

authoritarianism is that it develops formally not as a *denial*, but as an *extension* of rights. The term 'rights' is now appended to all manner of things. This explosion of formal rights has the effect of undermining real rights in society. So the right to

An explosion of formal rights has the effect of undermining real rights in society

free speech becomes lost in a jumble of demands, from the right not to be harassed to the right to outlaw racism. The extension of rights in this way also raises questions about the manner of their enforcement. Rights are no longer seen as freedoms which people organise together to wrest from the authorities. Rights are now seen as something to be given out and protected by a benevolent state. As such, an increase in the number of rights must mean a proportional extension of state intervention in our affairs. The expansion of rights ensures that the state expands its capacity to regulate and dominate society.

Our objection to the development of this system of paper rights is not based on some abstract opposition to state intervention. It is based on the recognition that elite domination in the new authoritarian form is no less severe than under the traditional mechanisms of capitalist dictatorship. Its potential for curbing action and censoring ideas is considerable. The ease with which political activism has been banned under anti-harassment codes in some universities illustrates this trend.

More broadly, the enforcement of rights by those in authority leads to dictating individual behaviour and regulating conduct. In effect, codes of conduct can be used to censor and repress in a way that is no less insidious than the old fascistic or McCarthyite types of repression. The biggest problem, however, is not so much the reality of new authoritarianism, but the fact that most aspects of it are not widely perceived to be problems. Worse, many radical-minded people are themselves complicit in justifying and extending these interventionist practices.

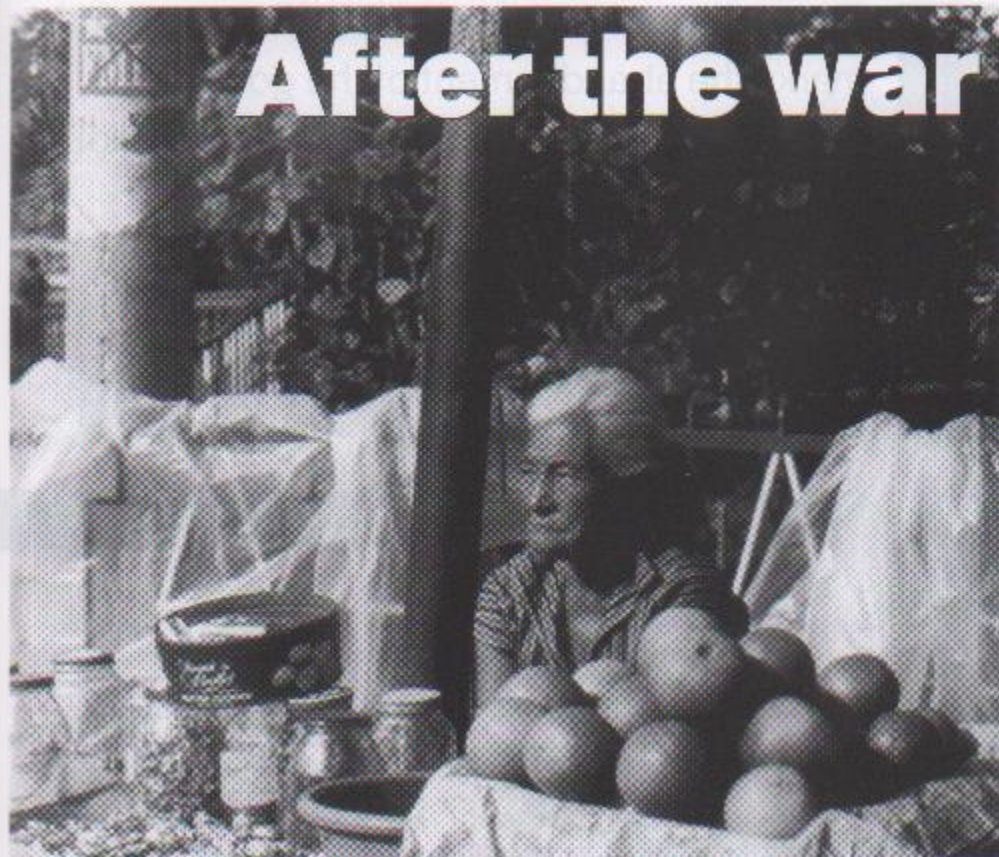
The new authoritarianism cannot be understood as a crude conspiracy. The trend towards the new authoritarianism is unsystematic and

often unconscious. It is a result of pragmatic compromises. Nor can it tackle the legitimacy crisis of the ruling class. Indeed, this intrusive tendency tends to be corrosive of all institutions, including those such as the family which the establishment used to cherish. Nevertheless, for the time being at least, the pervasive influence of the new authoritarianism ensures that those of us concerned to promote freedom and realise the human potential will be swimming against the political mainstream.

With the sense of limits and insecurity so strong today, change is perceived only in its destructive aspect, and as such it is seen as threatening. Such perceptions influence all sections of society. Political parties of the right as well as the left share this sentiment. The problem with handling change means that the argument for revolution invites blank incomprehension. Social revolution, the only means through which humanity can gain control over its destiny, has no place in the contemporary political imagination. Indeed the contemporary political imagination is so narrow, that anything which strays outside the middle ground can appear unduly radical. The irrelevance of the left-right distinction creates confusions for anyone attempting to interpret events according to the traditional vocabulary of politics. That is why the old hard left always tends to misinterpret contemporary events, such as the 'debate' about Clause IV in the Labour Party.

In the absence of a general recognition of what the real problems are, the arguments for revolutionary politics—and more importantly the reasons behind them—will be appreciated by relatively few people at present. The priority is to develop a more rounded intellectual alternative, a comprehensive critique of capitalism today. Developing and disseminating such an alternative cannot, however, be pursued merely on the intellectual plane. It will also require the development of organised political actions, that can expose the truth by exploiting the contradiction between the evolving forms of capitalist ideology and the positive instincts of people who have to survive in capitalist reality. ●

After the war



Paula Cerni reports from El Salvador on the price of the 'peace process'

'Everything is possible in El Salvador', said 25-year old Jorge when his car battery was stolen only yards from where he was sitting. It was a phrase he liked to repeat whenever he felt annoyed with his country. But, like others of his generation, Jorge was not referring to the war any more.

The 12-year conflict between the murderous US-backed regime and the left-wing FMLN guerrillas, which left almost 100 000 dead, and inspired the terrifying scenes of Oliver Stone's film *Salvador*, came to an end in 1992. Searching the country for clues as to what happened, you now only find silent ruins—FMLN murals overgrown by weeds, empty military watch-towers, bridges that were destroyed and never repaired. The war is a distant memory nobody wants to talk about and only tourists show any interest in.

Peace has brought few benefits to most Salvadorans. Over half the population of 5.5m still live in the dire poverty which the guerrillas fought to escape. But life goes on in spite of the hardship. Rosa Amelia, a 22-year old war child, joined the FMLN guerrillas aged eight. Her father was killed in action. Now she is working in San Salvador, hoping to improve her life not by fighting, but by studying further the radio and medical skills she learned during the war. In Chalatenango, her home town and once FMLN-held territory, I found the army playing volleyball in the main square. Although the locals were not interested, it was clear that the military felt relaxed and in control.

Today Salvadorans are preoccupied with corruption and crime—an expression of people's disenchantment with politics. Political leaders of all persuasions are regarded as unprincipled careerists, only in it for the money. With hindsight, even the former soldiers from both sides are seen as thugs who joined up to satisfy their criminal impulses, and are said to have turned to organised crime in peacetime. The sleaze factor now envelops all of the participants in the war, and has reduced what was a struggle for liberation to mere gang warfare in the public mind.

The disillusionment with the old causes has followed the peace settlement signed by the right-wing ARENA government and the FMLN under the auspices of the UN. The basic assumption behind the peace process is that the war was to be blamed on Salvadoran violence, not US intervention. The Truth Commission report published by the UN in 1993 has become the official history of the war. It named both guerrilla and army figures as war criminals, while leaving the USA, whose Cold War objectives and heavy doses of military aid fuelled the conflict, with clean hands. Through their participation in the UN's peace process, El Salvador's parties have accepted this version of events, discrediting themselves and Salvadoran politics as a whole.

When I visited the National Assembly, I found it had been occupied by former soldiers who had been left out of the system of compensation established by the peace accords. Most were men from poor, rural backgrounds, carrying machetes and broken broomsticks.

Hundreds of them, like Amílcar, had been forcibly recruited into the civil defence during the war. Amílcar had been in service for nine years, right up to the end of the war, without being paid by the army or allowed to keep his old job. Now the government was offering him 1000 colones (less than £100) in compensation for his nine years' service.

The protesters occupied the National Assembly for three days, keeping over 20 MPs as hostages. Yet they got no sympathy from anybody, least of all from the ARENA government on whose side they fought. ARENA MP Salvador Sales Aguilar, watching the occupation from a distance, told me: 'These people are criminals. You wouldn't allow anybody to take over the parliament in England, would you?'

The effects of the peace process have been most devastating on the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN). After 12 years of war the FMLN agreed to lay down its arms and converted into a legal political party. With its change of strategy the FMLN both abandoned the principles it had fought for and accepted responsibility for the war. The peace agreements conceded the FMLN's main demand that guerrillas should be given land, grants and other economic benefits in exchange for giving up the armed struggle. This has contributed to the perception that many only fought against the repressive regime for personal gain.

While she was being held hostage in the National Assembly, I talked to Ana Guadalupe Martínez, an MP from the most moderate sector of the FMLN. Like the ARENA MP, she did not support the demands of the ex-combatants occupying the building. She saw Salvadorans' concern about corruption as proof of a new-found democratic openness. As for crime, this former guerrilla leader said the solution is to strengthen the new Policía Nacional Civil—established by the peace accords and intended to protect the same state that the FMLN spent 12 years fighting against.

The elections in March 1994, in which abstentions were high, gave presidential, legislative and municipal power to ARENA, organisers of the death squads. It was a disappointing blow for the FMLN. Martínez said that, if the FMLN does not move further towards the centre of Salvadoran politics, it could lose 20 of its 21 seats: 'We must build an open party that will appeal to those who are not comfortable with us. As it is the FMLN is not attractive to the electorate. We want to govern, and that is only possible through change.' Here was a leader of an almost legendary guerrilla movement, and I felt like I was listening to Tony Blair.

I asked her what had happened to the anti-imperialist reputation of the FMLN. 'Times have changed', she said, adding that the concept of imperialism 'has disappeared'. Since I talked to her Ana Martínez's moderate faction has left the FMLN.

Having backed a bloody war of attrition for 12 years, US imperialism has managed not only to shift the blame on to the Salvadoran people, but has established itself, through UN agencies, as the legitimate arbiter of the peace. In the end, Washington won the war in El Salvador. It is no wonder that Salvadorans are cynical. ●



The argument for 'sustainable development' marks the abandonment of the goal of developing human society, says John Gillott

The dangers of 'sustainable development'

Sustainable development is one of those phrases that everyone, from radical third worldists and Oxfam to the World Bank and Margaret Thatcher, has adopted as their own. During 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the International Monetary Fund, expect to hear the phrase bandied about endlessly. Originally, the term was used primarily in relation to the environment and the third world. However, today, whatever the issue—biodiversity conservation, population control, the future of village life, the future of cities, the state of the global economy, road-building in rural England—you will find the need for sustainable development tagged on to the conclusion. What does it mean?

The phrase was first used in 1980, but it was the United Nations-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development that set out the definition most people are familiar with in its 1987 publication *Our Common Future*. Sustainable development, the commission wrote, is 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

In a speech to the Royal Society a year later, Margaret Thatcher put forward a market-oriented version of the same thing: 'The government espouses the concept of *sustainable* economic development. Stable prosperity can be achieved throughout the world provided the environment is nurtured and safeguarded.' The common theme is that plans for economic and social development must take account of the environmental context.

At first glance this might seem to be good common sense. But at second glance it seems vacuous. After all, who could be for *un-sustainable* development? What are 'the needs of the present'

in any case—£100 per week each, £500 or what? Ethiopia's per capita GNP is \$110 per year. In America the figure is \$23 000. Are the needs of either country's populations met?

Who is to decide what our needs are, some UN commission of the great and the good? And what do those demanding sustainable development have to say about the fact that some people satisfy their present needs by denying other people the ability to meet theirs—such as capitalists who sack people when profits are low, or international bankers who draw more money out of Africa in debt payments than is going in as aid.

Clearly, there are many ambiguities and all sorts of interpretations of what sustainable development means. However, everyone, from Oxfam to the World Bank, is agreed on one central theme: development must be constrained because there are natural limits—primarily resource limits and the limited ability of ecosystems to absorb human waste products—which humanity is currently exceeding.

The need to curtail development and respect natural limits is the central theme of sustainable development theories. This fact has sometimes been obscured by the *packaging* of the idea. Writers on sustainable development have always been keen to emphasise that people in the third world deserve more than they were offered by the 'no growth' Greens of the early 1970s. However, this nod in the direction of meeting human needs is always followed by a reaffirmation of the belief that human society is breaching natural limits, and must now prioritise *conservation* rather than economic development as the solution to contemporary environmental and social problems.

According to the authors of *Our Common Future*: 'In many parts of the world, the population

A challenge to prejudice and mysticism on matters scientific, technological and environmental.

FUTURES

Development'

is growing at rates that cannot be sustained by available environmental resources, at rates that are outstripping any reasonable expectations of improvements in housing, healthcare, food security, or energy supplies.' The idea that humanity is breaching natural limits is put more explicitly in another UN-backed publication, *Caring for the Earth* (1991): 'Governments should adopt explicit policies to limit resource consumption and population, and build these into development planning.' That conservation of natural resources should be our priority is also the message of David Pearce, Professor of Economics at University College London who, through his *Blueprint for a Green Economy* books, has led the move to introduce environmental concerns into the study of economics.

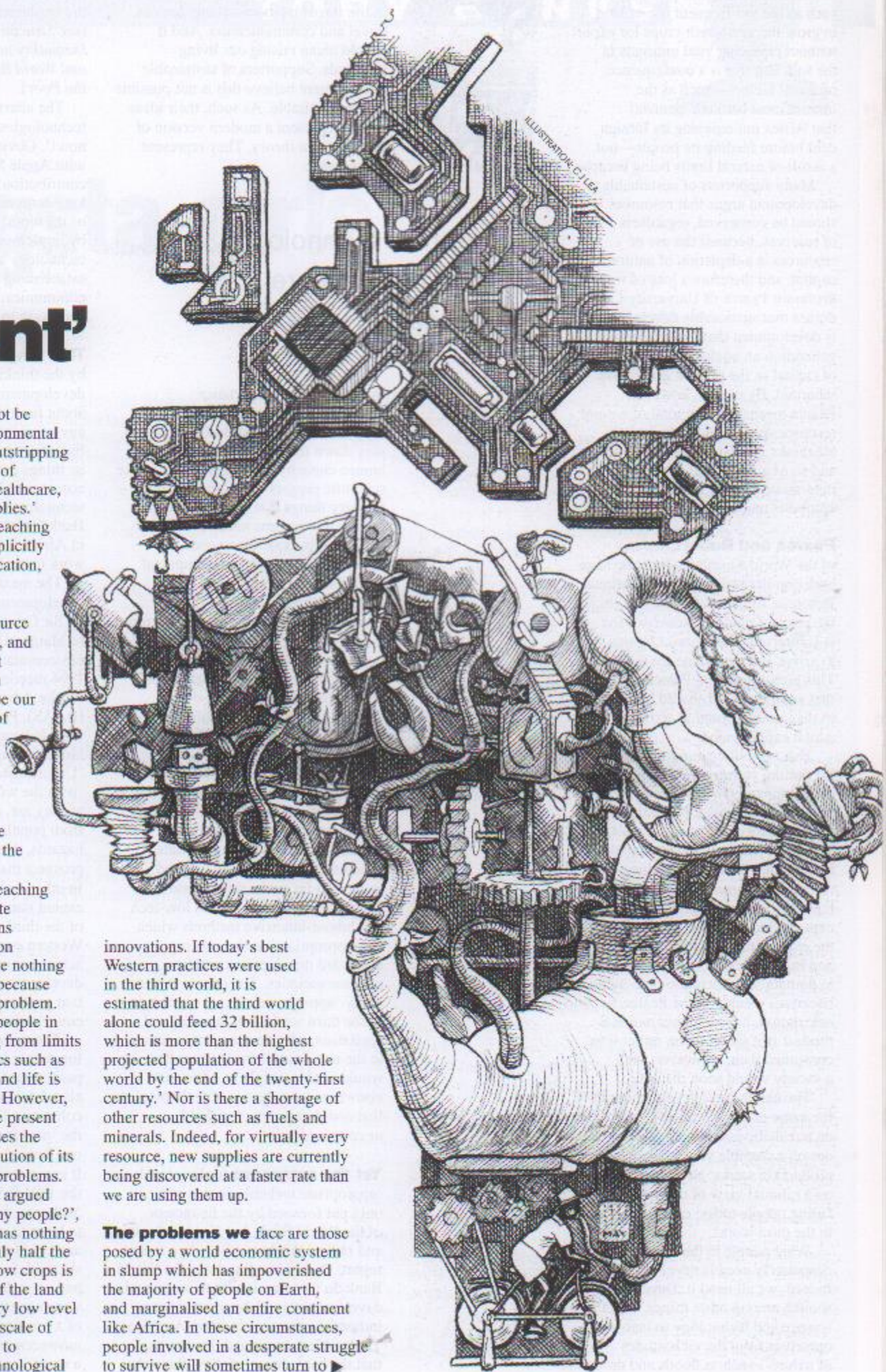
But is humanity really breaching natural limits? There are acute problems with current patterns of development, but writers on sustainable development have nothing to offer by way of solutions because they have misdiagnosed the problem.

It is plainly the case that people in the world today are suffering from limits of some sort. For many, basics such as food and shelter are scarce, and life is one long struggle to survive. However, these are limits caused by the present way in which society organises the global production and distribution of its wealth, not by any resource problems.

For instance, as I recently argued in *Living Marxism* ('Too many people?', September 1994) starvation has nothing to do with natural limits: 'Only half the land that could be used to grow crops is currently used. Also, much of the land that is used is farmed at a very low level of productivity. To grasp the scale of under-use, it is not necessary to hypothesise about future technological

innovations. If today's best Western practices were used in the third world, it is estimated that the third world alone could feed 32 billion, which is more than the highest projected population of the whole world by the end of the twenty-first century.' Nor is there a shortage of other resources such as fuels and minerals. Indeed, for virtually every resource, new supplies are currently being discovered at a faster rate than we are using them up.

The problems we face are those posed by a world economic system in slump which has impoverished the majority of people on Earth, and marginalised an entire continent like Africa. In these circumstances, people involved in a desperate struggle to survive will sometimes turn to ►



destructive methods of production—such as the too-frequent use of land to grow the same cash-crops for export without replacing vital nutrients in the soil. But this is a consequence of social factors—such as the international bankers' demand that Africa put repaying its foreign debt before feeding its people—not a result of natural limits being breached.

Many supporters of sustainable development argue that resources should be conserved, regardless of reserves, because the use of resources is a depletion of natural capital, and therefore a loss of wealth. Professor Pearce of University College argues that sustainable development is development that leaves the next generation an equivalent amount of capital as the present generation inherited. By capital, however, Pearce means the sum total of natural resources plus man-made capital. He thinks natural resources are scarce and so of a much higher value than man-made capital. From this the emphasis on conservation follows.

Pearce and Robert Repetto of the World Resources Institute have both popularised the idea of National Resource Accounts (NRAs). In these the price of natural resources used is subtracted from normal figures to arrive at a new value for GNP. This puts a figure on Pearce's idea that natural capital should be added to man-made capital to arrive at a total capital value.

This scientific-sounding argument for putting conservation before development is really based on fallacious reasoning. Not only is there no shortage of natural resources today, but these resources cannot be considered as capital values. Natural resources are useful to us only because human effort and ingenuity have been expended to extract them. Without the expenditure of human effort and ingenuity, they are of no worth to humanity. A society rich in natural resources would, by the Pearce/Repetto calculation, have a higher national product if it sat on them, rather than consumed them. However, such a society would soon die out.

The call to limit development in the name of conservation is not based on a realistic assessment of resources, nor on a credible view of the way production works. Neither is it based on a rational view of the problems facing people today, especially people in the third world.

What people in the third world desperately need is development. Indeed, we all need it. Development should, among other things, mean using science and technology to insulate ourselves from the vicissitudes of nature—such as floods and droughts.



It should mean expanding our options in life through labour-saving devices, travel and communication. And it should mean raising our living standards. Supporters of sustainable development believe this is not possible or even desirable. As such, their ideas do not represent a modern version of development theory. They represent the opposite.

Appropriate technology in Africa means more back-breaking work

In elevating the importance of conserving natural resources, supporters of sustainable development play down the positive worth of the human capacity to change things, make scientific progress and produce more—the very things that humanity needs to help it overcome social problems and meet its expanding needs. Writers on sustainable development rarely lambast the principle of science and technology in the way fundamentalist Greens do. But, at root, their reasoning is quite similar: they insist that the appliance of science should be constrained by perceived natural limits.

In the language of sustainable development, the use of science and technology must always be 'appropriate', especially in the third world. What does this mean? Of course technology should be appropriate, just as development should be sustainable. But what appropriate is taken to mean today is 'limited'. In fact, so far as the third world is concerned, it usually means low-tech and labour-intensive methods which are 'appropriate' to the existing backward development patterns of these societies. The people this is really 'appropriate' for are not the poor of the third world, but international capitalists, who do not want to invest in the necessary infrastructure that would enable people in Africa and elsewhere to make use of technologies that could improve crop yields or communications.

Yet the argument for low-level 'appropriate technologies' is not only put forward by the financiers of the World Bank, but also by charities and radical third worldists. In a recent report, Oxfam congratulated the World Bank on its commitment to sustainable development and labour-intensive industrial processes in Latin America. The problem is, argued the charity, that the bank doesn't follow through

on its commitments and insist upon the implementation of these policies (see *Structural Adjustment and Inequality in Latin America: How IMF and World Bank Policies Have Failed the Poor*).

The alternative to labour-intensive technologies in Africa is not 'hi-tech now!'. Obviously, flooding Rwanda with Apple Macs would not be a great contribution at the moment. But the long-term needs of people in all areas of the world will be best served by implementing the most advanced technology across the board, and establishing the highest level of communication and cooperation necessary to use it.

This long-term goal is negated by the thinking behind sustainable development, which is ultimately about limiting development by raising environmental concerns. The bottom line message of sustainable development is: things cannot change much, so accept your lot. So while 'appropriate' technology sounds fine in the World Bank/Oxfam brochure, on the ground in Africa it means more back-breaking work using limited, outdated technology.

The meaning of sustainable development was openly expressed by Sir Crispin Tickell, former adviser to Margaret Thatcher on the environment, in a speech to the 1994 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS). Poor countries, he said, want to become as much like industrialised countries as possible. 'Unfortunately', Tickell concluded, 'with the world's resources distributed as they are, and with pressures arising from population increase and other hazards, there is not the slightest prospect that this will ever happen'. In other words, global capitalism cannot sustain the development of the third world even up to current Western standards of living, never mind achieve something better. Sustainable development is an idea that couches that grim reality in acceptable, environmental terms.

The policies recommended for people in the third world are being put forward as desirable in the West also. Last November, *Living Marxism* columnist Toby Banks referred to the 'new frugalism' espoused on Channel 4's *The Scrimpers*. It is a growing movement. Opening the 1994 BAAS conference, Dr Anne McLaren said the West would have to learn to make-do and mend. Darning and cobbling are set for a comeback, she said. Such regressive views are bad enough on Channel 4. That this was suggested in the opening address of a prestigious meeting on the advancement of science is a worrying thing indeed.



Gangsta girls

'Across Britain, teenage girls are forming themselves into gangs with little fear of the law.' So began a recent edition of the BBC's investigative programme *Public Eye*, which likes to keep up with—and ahead of—current developments. If you live in London and don't get out of the house much, you could be forgiven for thinking that the streets once ruled by the Krays and Richardsons are now in the hands of psychopathic 15-year olds. Elizabeth Hurley robbed of a tenner in broad daylight; Peckham and Deptford turned into a battleground by the 'Ghetto Girls' ('They're rough, they're tough and they never back down', boasted a sweet little black Ghetto Girl unconvincingly). Even the *Croydon Advertiser* has devoted its front page to a local reign of terror.

Details are vague, and witnesses rare, no doubt for fear of recriminations if they speak out. The *Sunday Times* claims that girls as young as 14 'can hold a stare with insolent defiance as they sit opposite you on the bus', but evidence of actual violence is sparse. Nonetheless, *Public Eye's* intrepid journalists managed to track down some *bona fide* gangsta girls, and a brave victim prepared to go public about his ordeal. The results were shocking, though not in quite the way intended. 'It's not like joining the Girl Scouts', an expert warned any viewers who may have been thinking of getting involved. 'You join it for a reason and you know what you're getting into and you want it.' We found out what she meant when we were confronted by the full horror of the Bench Hill Girls from Wythenshawe in Manchester.

'You jumped on her head with big hiking boots! For what reason?' Reporter Wendy Robbins' voice trembled as she asked the questions that a nation demanded answers to. The camera zoomed into a face displaying a typical teenage mixture of amusement and embarrassment. 'Cause she was lying.' The police had their say too. 'What have you noticed about young female behaviour in the last few years?', asked Wendy. 'It's getting worse', replied the officer dutifully. 'They'll do anything, there's nothing they won't do now.'

Point a microphone at a teenager and suggest that they have had sex with a thousand partners or organised a secret network of hooligans or been crack addicts since they were six, and they won't deny it. Feed a policeman a question and he is not likely to tell you that things are getting better and young people are more polite and respectful than ever. No journalist worth her salt would give such stuff the time of day. 'There's an element of exaggeration in much of what they say and do', Wendy conceded, 'but behind the posturing there's a serious problem'. She might have been referring to the programme-makers, but the serious problem she was talking about was Bench Hill, 'one of Manchester's trouble spots'.

If Bench Hill—which made *Dixon of Dock Green* look like South Central LA on a bad night—is a trouble spot, then the rest of Manchester must be heaven on earth. A dozen 15-year old girls, with two cans

of lager between them, hung around outside a pub. One smoked a fag. A few of them started singing, and one tripped over. A fire engine went past and they waved and called out. Wendy moved in and asked why they were standing around. Out came the standard replies, handed down from mother to daughter since the days of bobby sox and teenage tearaways. 'Nothing to do... No youth clubs.' It was cute, but Wendy wasn't having any of it. 'Why are you drinking when it's illegal?' They shook their heads like long-suffering mums. 'Oh, every teenager does it at some time', said one.

With no sign of mayhem and bloodshed, it was over to the beleaguered Wythenshawe Homewatch police bus. 'They may not be doing anything wrong, but the sheer numbers intimidate', complained the homebeat officer. Assuming he didn't mean that the Greater Manchester constabulary was intimidated by the Bench Hill Girls, you might have expected at least one frightened pensioner to appear in silhouette with disguised voice. But no. Nor was there any sign of any intimidation in the streets, which were deserted. Perhaps the local population was too scared to venture out at all.

Fortunately for Wendy, 'the girls' reputation extends beyond Benchley—to Gatley, a prosperous village a few miles away, where a beer can had allegedly

been thrown by a Bench Hill Girl. A 7pm curfew has now been imposed on them in the village. They are unsurprised: 'It's a posh place and we might give it a bad name.' In Gatley one man was prepared to speak out about the menace—a beefy posh-talking grocer who looked to have served his time in rugby scrums. 'They're uncouth, their language is completely foul, they're unruly, arrogant. When you get a whole bunch of them with drink at that age, and with the aggression they seem to have within them, then one has to be scared.'

Some girls eventually agreed to spill the beans about the 'unlawful elements'. What sort of things do they get up to, asked Wendy. 'Have a laugh, go out together, go to clubs and that, go shopping, go to the civic on Saturday... Go grafting [sniggers]...'

Aha! Under questioning it turned out that the unlawful element was singular: 15-year old Sonia. (Cut to Sonia's mum next to a picture of Sonia in her communion dress.) Sonia's crime wave consisted of nicking some nappies and baby food with a friend who had a kid. The girls all agreed that shoplifting was OK, but robbing people's houses was out of order. Wendy badgered them about the rights of the shops, but they wouldn't shift.

There *are* gangs breeding fear in Britain, and more and more females are getting involved. Their 'tags'—Wendy Roberts, Lisa Brinkworth, Bea Campbell—can be seen everywhere, in newspapers and on TV. There is a strong element of exaggeration in what they say, but their sheer numbers allow them to intimidate people, especially the elderly. My advice is to turn off the telly and go out at night. ●

'It's not like joining the Girl Scouts'

A cathedral for the

Remember that TV ad for life insurance which reckoned that the Great Wall of China was the only man-made object visible from space? Well, it's out of date. There is now a second man-made object visible from space—Kansai Airport in Japan's Osaka Bay.

Kansai is truly one of the wonders of the modern world. It is built on a huge man-made island in the middle of Osaka Bay which was created by demolishing three mountains and dumping their contents in the sea. The volume of the island is 75 times that of the pyramids at Giza. It took 6000 workers four years to build the island. Another 10000 worked on the airport itself.

Kansai's construction sums up one of the paradoxes of our times. The airport represents an astonishing technological achievement, a late-twentieth century equivalent of the pyramids or the Eiffel Tower. Yet its many critics see in Kansai more the folly of human invention than the achievement of human potential. The airport terminal itself is the largest architectural project in the world. It was designed by Renzo Piano, the Italian architect who, together with Richard Rogers, built the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

The building brings together the most advanced design, engineering, materials and computer technology and adds a few innovations of its own. Because it is built on an artificial island, the airport is constantly shifting. To compensate for this the 900 columns on which the terminal building stands have to be adjusted each day to keep the building level. A central computer picks up data from sensors on each of the columns and automatically moves all 900 to maintain stability.

The designers had to adapt the airport structure to withstand the rigours of the local climate too. There are frequent typhoons and earthquakes in

Sheila Phillips reports on the construction of Kansai Airport, a wonder of the modern world



PHOTO: A GUTHRIE-COVE ARUP & PARTNERS

e new millennium

this area. The building had to be flexible enough to withstand both. The huge glass walls at either end of the main body of the building are constructed from 500 panels of glass, hung from masts like the sails of a boat. The wind pressure of, say, a typhoon is taken by the masts, not the glass. The seals around the glass are made of rubber to allow for movement.

Each one of the 250 ribs that form the curve of the roof had to be pulled into position by cables and then bolted in place, after which the cables were removed. Each rib on its own has little strength, but the structure as a whole will resist the storms and typhoons that blow frequently across Osaka Bay. The joints between the northern and southern parts of the building also allow for differential movement in all directions.

The airport terminal is vast—more than a mile long from tip to tip, and the canyon inside the main body of the building is 300 feet high. It is so immense that

conventional air-conditioning could not be used. Instead conditioned air is blown at the roof by huge jets, the nozzles for which are sculptures created by a workshop more used to producing statues for Japan's teenage love hostels. Hanging in the air flow are wind sculptures in yellow and blue, resembling kites fluttering about in the roof space.

Despite its vastness the building is not an eyesore. Its shape resembles a glider in flight and its design reflects its function. The glass covering allows the runways and the planes to be seen from almost every vantage point in the building. Renzo Piano has referred to the canyon in the body of the terminal as 'cathedral-like space'. Indeed Kansai Airport is a cathedral for the new millennium, but it is more than that. Piano's 'cathedral' expresses the possibilities of human achievement in the same way as the Sistine Chapel or York Minster in their day, but it also demonstrates the enormous

technological advances we have made since.

Yet ask anyone who has heard of the project what they think of Kansai Airport and they are likely to say, 'Oh, it's sinking isn't it?'. Generally this is said with a kind of glee, as if to declare, 'That's another fine mess man has got into by trying something new'. It is a view that seems to reflect society's current preoccupation with expecting the worst rather than seeing the possibilities for the future.

Other criticisms are even more absurd. Recently I gave a lecture on the building of the airport. 'It's all very well talking about human achievement', was the first response from the audience, 'but who is going to stand up for the mountains that were destroyed?'. As far as I know none of the mountains objected to being demolished. But society today seems so trapped by the sense of the parochial that people worry more about the feelings of mountains than our breathtaking capacity to master nature.

Of course, Kansai Airport is not simply a story of the triumph of human ingenuity. The Japanese authorities have built it as a symbol not of human achievement, but of their own burgeoning power in the world. The thousands of men and women who slaved away on its construction were treated not as the creators of a technological miracle, but as commodities to be exploited. The development of the airport has taken place in the midst of the severest economic slump of this century, which has ruined the lives of millions, both in Japan and across the world.

Yet, despite all this, the airport still stands as a monument to human achievement. Whatever constraints society may place upon us, projects such as Kansai should remind us that the potential of humanity remains undimmed. As Kangi Matsumoto, the engineer on the project, remarked: 'It's amazing what man can do.'



The princess of thieves

Alka Singh on a refreshingly different Indian film

ew Indian films have caused as much controversy as Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen*. Based on Mala Sen's biography of Phoolan Devi, *Bandit Queen* follows Devi's life from when she became a child bride, through her various attempts to find freedom, to her final capture as one of India's most wanted criminals. The film's controversial subject and its graphic scenes of violence, nudity and gang rape have led it to be banned in India. Even Phoolan Devi wants it censored, largely I suspect because she is now hoping to enter a respectable political career.

Bold, brash and at times a little crass, *Bandit Queen* is nevertheless a refreshing film. It is neither Bollywood nor art-house. It has neither the fantasy quality that characterises the vast output of Indian films nor the laid-back lyricism of, say, a Satyajit Ray piece. There are no soft sitars here backing scenes of a romanticised poverty-stricken India.

The sparse, barren landscape perfectly expresses the harshness of people's lives. It gives us a glimpse of a society in which daughters are off-loaded into arranged marriages at a young age and in which upper caste men treat lower caste women with contempt. The unjust and iniquitous power relationships are expressed almost to the point of caricature in the infamous scenes of gang rape and when Devi is publicly stripped naked.

The close-up of Devi's father's face as his daughter is condemned by the village elders for having 'led on' her rapist (son of a rich family which rules the village) is moving. It sums up the mute powerlessness into which people are forced. It is all the more moving because it is a brief moment—unlike the rape scenes which are shown in a more drawn out, dramatic way, to the point where they evoke a cut-off response in the viewer.

There is a tension in the film, which is never resolved, between the portrayal of broader social relationships and situations and the tendency to focus in detail on the story of a particular woman's suffering. The attempt to deal with both does not quite work within the film's genre, which is essentially a naturalistic drama-documentary.

What is refreshing about the film, however, is the way that it upsets the perceived wisdom about third world women. The story of a poor female victim of barbarism, *Bandit Queen* could have

Seema Biswas plays the *Bandit Queen*



been just the kind of feminist fare that Western liberals love, where the debasement of Indian women is used to assert the superiority of the Western way of life. Indeed given that the film was made with support from Farrukh Dhondy and Channel 4's *Film on Four* strand, this might have been the expected message. To a large extent, however, *Bandit Queen* refuses to fulfil such prejudiced Western expectations.

Phoolan Devi is not represented as a victim needing empowerment. Her anger, her fists and her gun are what keep her going. A woman in her situation in such a society has no other choice. Her options are to stay 'bound' in a hated marriage or to return to her family, bringing public shame on to her parents and being treated like an outcast rather than just lower caste. When she is kidnapped by bandits, she realises that by working

with these outcasts who reject the caste system, she has got a greater chance of getting her revenge. Here is a woman who fucks and fights with a vengeance, who achieves a Robin Hood status and is eventually captured by the state. Phoolan Devi might be a Princess of Thieves but she is certainly no Kevin Costner figure.

I went to see the film during the recent London Film Festival. In the discussion afterwards a woman objected to the portrayal of Devi as a 'victim'. She was greeted with howls of derisory laughter from most of the audience. It is precisely the film's denial of the West's favourite images of the third world that made many liberal critics uneasy about *Bandit Queen* and which makes the film so invigorating.

Bandit Queen opens in major cities on 17 February.

The Ideology of Imperialism



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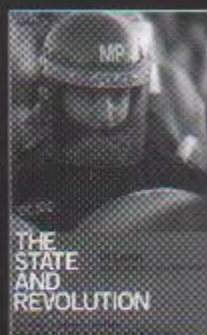
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Ghetto funk



Neil Davenport on how rap's bad boys have joined the attack on gangsta rap

he trial of rap star Snoop Doggy Dog as an accessory to murder has thrown the spotlight once more on gangsta rap and on its most successful exponent—G-Funk. The brainchild of former Nigga With Attitude Dr Dre, G-Funk's lascivious funk and sinister, laid-back rapping has taken America by storm. Over the past three years Dre's G-Funk label, Death Row, has quickly established itself with an enviable platinum track record. Dr Dre's *Chronic* and Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* have both sold around four million copies. With further critical and commercial success for Warren G, Death Row records is indeed shaping up to be 'a Motown for the nineties'.

Gangsta rap's violent portrayal of ghetto life and its misogyny have always allowed white liberals to vent their spleen against black America. The unprecedented success of G-Funk has ensured even more frothing at the mouth about the sex and violence of gangsta rap—and particularly so when Snoop hit No1 at the same time as being indicted as an accessory to murder.

But what is different now is the way that the condemnation of G-Funk has come not just from white liberals, but also from black American leaders and from those within the hip-hop community.

Are Warren G (left) and Snoop Doggy Dogg (right) moving out to the suburbs?

In Britain Jesse Jackson might be notorious for his Channel 4 Christmas message to the nation, in which he criticised Britain for its racism. In America, however, Jackson is keen not to be associated with the outrageousness of gangsta rappers. 'They may be our colour', Jackson has claimed, 'but they are not our kind'.

More surprisingly perhaps, rappers like Public Enemy and Ice-T—once the 'bad boys' of rap and no strangers to controversy themselves—have joined in the chorus of disapproval. 'Everybody's talking about that drive-by shit', Public Enemy complained on their last album. 'Everybody's talking about that gangsta shit.' Even G-Funk stars like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Warren G are playing down their pasts, distancing themselves from gang life and vouching for peace. Such backtracking compares rather unfavourably with Stevie Wonder's refusal to condemn Niggas With Attitude.

The concern among black critics is that G-Funk helps to perpetuate the racist myth that black males are gun-toting, murderous criminals. This is missing the point. Both gangsta rap and its critics play on the same stereotypes of the black community.

Gangsta rappers claim to 'tell it like it is' about ghetto life. In fact the amoral imagery of rap exaggerates racial

stereotypes and throws them back in white America's face. G-Funk's extreme portrayal of ghetto violence becomes so absurd that it renders it comical rather than chilling. But such exaggeration also betrays a sense that for blacks there is no escape from ghetto life. Snoop Doggy Dog was asked whether, given his new found fame, he would push for political improvement of black life. 'Martin Luther King tried that shit', he replied, 'and it didn't work'.

Meanwhile, when gangsta rap's critics condemn its celebration of the ghetto they are accepting the prevailing idea that the problems of black America lie within the black community. Albums such as Public Enemy's *Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age* or films such as John Singleton's *Boyz 'n the Hood* or Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* ram home the point that the problems of the black community start with the violence or irresponsibility of young black males, the promiscuity of black women, or the prevalence of drugs in the ghetto. Behind the militant posturing of rappers like Public Enemy or Ice-T there was always a conservative take on black problems. With the current willingness to join the attack on gangsta rap, that inward-looking conservatism has become a new vehicle for legitimising the racist backlash against black America.

MARXIST REVIEW OF BOOKS

Helene Guldberg reviews the revival of interest in the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and explains why it's not all in the mind

Psyche and society

The Vygotsky Reader, Rene Van Der Veer and Jaan Valsiner, Blackwell, £14.99 pbk

The Individual and Society: A Marxist Approach to Human Psychology, John Robinson, Index Academic, £9.95 pbk

Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, Routledge £11.99 pbk

Ape, Primitive Man and Child: Essays in the History of Behaviour, AR Luria and LS Vygotsky, Harvester Wheatsheaf, £12.95 pbk

Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Socio-historical Psychology, Luis C Moll (ed), Cambridge University Press, £14.95 pbk

Two seemingly contradictory trends have come to the fore in modern psychology. One trend is the increasing eclecticism and compartmentalisation of the discipline as a whole. The scope of investigation within psychology is being narrowed further still. The focus of analysis is no longer simply restricted to isolated individuals, but is in the main narrowed down to separate and discrete cognitive processes within those individuals.

The other trend is the resurgence of interest in developmental psychology and the contribution of 'social' factors to the development of the mind. This interest has grown out of a dissatisfaction with approaches to psychology grounded in individualistic assumptions. Cognitive psychology is a case in point. This strand within psychology focuses its analysis on separate mental functions completely disconnected from social activity. A growing recognition of the limitations of such narrow investigations of the human mind has led not just to an increasing interest in social and developmental psychology, but also to a re-evaluation of the work of the Russian Lev Vygotsky, who pioneered these areas of psychological investigation.

Despite the renewed interest in social psychology there is a substantial misunderstanding of what is meant by the 'social formation of the mind'. When 'society' is explored today, it is rarely done in terms of broader social and historical forces. Rather society tends to be reduced to the relations between individuals and, according to the jargon, their 'significant others'. Contemporary psychology does at times go beyond an investigation of the isolated individual, but it rarely goes further than exploring the sphere of interpersonal behaviour.

Outside the school of social psychology, the increasing

eclecticism and the narrowing of the terrain of exploration mean that there is an 'imminent danger of psychology becoming a non-science at best, and a nonsense at worst', as Van Der Veer and Valsiner aptly put it (in R Cocking and A Renninger (eds), *The Development and Meaning of Psychological Distance*, 1993, p35).

This tendency towards eclecticism is what John Robinson is referring to in his book *The Individual and Society: A Marxist Approach to Human Psychology* when he talks about psychology having become a 'collection of specialisms' incapable of working out a genuinely scientific theory of human nature. If you open up any psychology textbook today you will find a collection of headings on separate topics such as memory, attention, perception, personality, child development, motivation, neuroscience and so on, with no attempt to draw together the various research topics into a broader understanding of our humanity.

At the heart of the problem is a fundamentally flawed conception of the relationship between the individual and society. The individual is seen somehow to be separate from society. As a result, investigations of isolated individuals, or of separate cognitive processes within their minds, are rarely placed within the context of the multitude of social relations that have shaped the individuals concerned. The subject matter of psychology, according to Robinson, should be 'the life-activity of individuals, the content of which is a one-sided expression of the total and integrated yet many-faceted historical development of the human race' (p205). Any investigation of the individual human mind removed from a broader understanding of society will therefore necessarily be limited. ▶

The usefulness of *The Individual and Society* is that Robinson does focus on the problem of how to break down the dualistic presentation of the individual and society which is characteristic of psychology. Although he does not break new ground, the book is a worthwhile introduction to the contribution made in particular by Marx and Engels, but also by some thinkers within psychology such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Erich Fromm, to the task of clarifying this relationship.

Many of the concerns addressed by Robinson are better dealt with in the work of Lev Vygotsky, a leading figure in post-revolutionary Soviet psychology. Although his work does date back 70 years, Vygotsky's contribution to the development of an integrated science of human nature is still unique. And his quest to develop a truly human psychology that bridges the gap between the individual and society is inspirational.

In *Ape, Primitive Man and Child*, Vygotsky, with his co-author AR Luria, outlines three distinct lines of development that have shaped and continue to shape modern human beings. One is the evolutionary line of development, which has created the biological prerequisite for our humanity. It was as a result of natural selection and chance mutations that humans first arrived on the stage of history. Our greatly developed cortex was and still is the natural basis for the formation of our higher mental processes and conscious behaviour—though even the cortex developed under the stimulus of primitive tool use. This is why no matter how much we may try to train evolutionarily less advanced animals to become replicas of ourselves—like Washoe, the chimpanzee who used sign-language—we will not succeed.

Biology alone, however, cannot explain our distinctiveness. We are today genetically almost identical to human beings 100 000 years ago. However in terms of our social organisation, behaviour, intelligence, linguistic skills, attitudes and outlook we are incomparable to our prehistoric ancestors. Human development over the past tens of thousands of years has been a result purely of social and cultural evolution.

What characterises our humanity is the emergence of society, a uniquely human creation, which has allowed us to shape and reshape ourselves.

Every human being is an expression of and a personification of society as a whole

The social basis of humanity means we must go beyond the individual biological organism in order to understand highly complex forms of human consciousness. The origins of conscious activity, Vygotsky pointed out, can only be found in the social and historical forms of human existence. This does not mean that an investigation into individual development is invalid. But it is necessary to understand that the development of one individual cannot be separated from the development of all preceding or contemporary individuals. Every human being is an expression of and a personification of society as a whole. But each individual is a distinctive and peculiar expression of that society. Therefore an investigation into human consciousness must start with an analysis of the development of society, of which the individual human

being is an integral, indispensable but subordinate part.

This brings us to the third line of development outlined by Vygotsky—the ontogenetic line of development: the question of the mechanism by which society is internalised within the individual is an important integral part in any understanding of the formation of the human mind.

Ape, Primitive Man and Child was written in order to show that 'the behaviour of civilised man is the product of all three lines of development and may be understood and explained scientifically only by means of the three distinct paths out of which the history of human behaviour has been formed' (pxi).

At birth the individual human being is a biological being just like any other animal

Sadly, however, it is precisely the broader aspect of Vygotsky's work that seems to be lost in the plethora of books recently written on the man and his ideas. The recent Vygotsky revival has focused primarily on his insights into the third line of development—that of individual ontogeny, or the way individuals internalise their environment—removed from an understanding of the broader context in which his specific insights in this area should be viewed.

Two books which are welcome exceptions in this respect are *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* by Fred Newman and Lois Holzman and *Vygotsky and Education* by LC Moll. These authors appreciate the real significance of Vygotsky's method of investigation and his broader theory. They take inspiration from Vygotsky's incorporation of rigorous investigations of individuals and their development into a broader theory of human nature. They also appreciate the insights that can be gained from examinations of individual cognitive processes, if these investigations are not carried out in isolation from the individual as a whole person.

As Moll points out, Vygotsky did examine psychological units—but not as atomised, separate, compartmentalised elements, seeing them rather as units which contain all the basic characteristics of the whole organism. Although it is necessary thoroughly to investigate separate psychological processes, a full understanding of their origin, development and function can only be achieved if these processes are seen as irreducible parts of the whole individual within the context of society.

It was by combining his theoretical outlook with a rigorous investigation into how children learn and develop, that Vygotsky was able to make real gains in understanding the formation of the human mind.

The point of Vygotsky's theory is that individual development involves a transition from lower mental functions to higher mental functions through the mediating role of cultural 'sign systems' such as language. At birth the individual human being is a biological being just like any other animal—albeit more advanced in evolutionary terms. However at some stage in the child's development something very novel emerges. This is purposive behaviour. What Vygotsky set out to explore was the defining moments in the transformation of human individuals from biological animals to social beings.

To identify these defining moments Vygotsky developed a methodology that was faithful to his theory. He particularly wanted to study the formation of psychological processes, rather than examine behaviour once it is fixed. Vygotsky contended that in the course of the transition to higher mental functions new psychological systems are created and recreated. Therefore we shall only understand higher mental functions if we search for their origins and map out their processes of development. The key is to try to make visible the processes which are already hidden in automatic habitual behaviour. This is why Vygotsky emphasised the importance of child development as an area of research.

What Vygotsky found was that the most significant moment in the development of the individual occurred when language and practical intelligence, two previously separate spheres of development, converge. It is when thought and speech come together and start shaping each other that the child starts to acquire truly human characteristics. Language becomes a tool of thought and is used by the child to increasingly master his own behaviour.

It was as a result of these insights that Vygotsky was able to make sense of something that has baffled many psychologists for years. This is the predominance of a type of speech in children that serves little or no communicative function. In the 1920s, the eminent theorist Jean Piaget discovered that a large proportion of the children's remarks were never addressed to a listener. To Piaget, these types of remarks, which he labelled 'egocentric speech' served no function, but were merely an indication of children's intellectual immaturity and inability to see things from another person's point of view.

'Egocentric speech' does not disappear, but gradually becomes internalised into private, inner speech—or, in other words, thought

But in *Ape, Primitive Man and Child* Vygotsky points out that 'egocentric speech', although it is external in form, does serve an important internal function. 'Egocentric speech' is the precursor to the powerful role that language plays as a regulator of mental activities. It does not disappear, but gradually becomes internalised into private, inner speech—or, in other words, thought. Vygotsky found that whenever children were faced with any challenging situations their actions would always be accompanied by speech. In fact if he prevented children from speaking they would often be unable to fulfil the tasks.

Vygotsky and Luria concluded that 'the meeting between speech and thinking is therefore a major event in the development of the individual; in fact, it is this connection that raises human thinking to extraordinary heights' (*Ape, Primitive Man and Child*, p140).

But thought and language do not come together of their own accord. The dynamic that pushes them together is human interaction through society. This is the significance of the term 'Zones of Proximal Development' (ZPD) coined and developed by Vygotsky. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent

problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under peer collaboration or adult guidance (see *Mind and Society*, 1978, p86).

Vygotsky supposes the existence of special moments in the development of the child on the path to higher levels of psychological organisation. The key to such a transformation of the child's mental processes is the social situation. It was in the context of looking at the effects of schooling on mental development that Vygotsky first developed this concept. Instruction, then, is an important part of the social situation under consideration.

'In play the child is always higher than his average age, higher than his usual everyday behaviour; he is in play as if a head above himself'

Vygotsky was looking at the reorganisation of psychological processes that leads to qualitative changes in the way the child thinks. However it is not only through instruction that children and adults learn. Through conceptualising ZPDs Vygotsky aimed to investigate what it was about the existing situation that allowed a child to 'go beyond the present'.

In Vygotsky's eyes, children's play also creates such a Zone of Proximal Development: 'In play the child is always higher than his average age, higher than his usual everyday behaviour; he is in play as if a head above himself.'

Vygotsky pointed out that action that takes place in the imaginary sphere forces the child to free himself from situational constraints and act independently of what he sees or hears. In very young children an intimate fusion exists between a word and its meaning. However, through play, thought is often separated from objects, and children for the first time will start reasoning about what is possible rather than merely what is real.

Vygotsky's work deepened our understanding of 'egocentric speech', how children think and learn, and the developmental significance of play. Perhaps it is not surprising then that within the sphere of education Vygotsky is viewed as the 'Mozart of psychology'. However in most of the books written on Vygotsky the revolutionary aspect of his theory is lost. As is pointed out by Newman and Holzman in *Lev Vygotsky*, he himself made the point that he did not want to 'discover the nature of the mind by patching together a lot of quotations', but instead wanted to 'find out how a science has to be built' (p1). Ironically much of the current discussion on Vygotsky does involve the patching together of many of his quotations removed from a proper understanding of what he set out to achieve. He made a unique contribution to the challenge of marrying psychology with an investigation of society. What determines the development of each individual is their own particular biography. But that biography can only be fully grasped if looked at in the context of society as a whole. The books on Vygotsky dealt with here are worth a read precisely because they do recognise the significance of the real breakthrough Vygotsky made in developing a truly human psychology.

Dispatches from the Front Line of Popular Culture, Tony Parsons, Virgin Books, £15.99 hbk

If you are not already familiar with Tony Parsons views on paper, you may know him from his weekly appearance on *The Late Show's* review of current culture—he's the one that still wears weejuns with white socks. The collection of articles in the book is representative of Parsons at his best and most offensive.

In the beginning there was punk. The 'Anarchy in the UK' tour, at the end of the seventies inspired a whole generation of music journalists, but few were able to articulate the excitement that characterised punk. Parsons (with Julie Burchill, to whom he was briefly married) was picked up by the music press to speak to and for the 'blank generation'.

Parsons was in the right place (London) at the right time (1977). As he says in his introduction to *Dispatches*, 'if I had been born 10 years earlier or later then no doubt I would have been begging to be allowed on to the motoring pages by now'. The book shows Parsons to be a man of his times. In the seventies it was punk rock—the kids were alright. In the late eighties we were supposed to be living in a 'Tattooed jungle'—the peasants were revolting. In the nineties it's parenthood—ahem. Parsons' penchant for in-yer-face pop journalism is what has made him the best and most despised cultural critic of his generation. His infamous 'Tattooed jungle' was a vitriolic attack on the working classes written in 1989, which still reverberates five years on.

The release of *Dispatches* is a reminder of his contempt for the lower orders ('they don't care enough about the street they live on to bother binning their rubbish...they sour everything they come into contact with'); for women ('drink tends to emphasise all that is unpleasant about a woman. If she is a bit of a slut, then getting drunk will find her offering a blow-job to the wine waiter'); and even beggars ('I hate the way they make a beautiful city ugly, the way they shuffle about in a lager haze first thing in the morning. All kinds of beggars everywhere in this city...they have no shame').

First time round people took offence. But this time the biggest complaint is that his copy is tired—a contentless piece for the *Modern Review* (Dec/Jan 1994/95) being the worst of a bad lot.

At the time of 'Tattooed jungle', most critics were simply embarrassed that Parsons shouted what they dared only mumble into the bottom of their wine glasses. In the nineties, you don't need a brass neck to slag off the 'underclass'. It is timely that Parsons should recant the excesses of the 'Tattooed jungle' article. In a recent interview he says he now feels that he was identifying a brutish underclass rather than the real working class—which is supposed to excuse his misanthropic attack by attaching it to a more readily accepted prejudice. What characterises Parsons is his ability to hit the nerve of political and cultural movement, which is at one and the same time quite precise and painfully cackhanded, like fly-fishing with an Uzi.

The *Modern Review* described the 1993 *Arena* column 'Why women shouldn't drink (too) much' as

Parsons at his worst. In fact, re-reading it now, it is a return to what made Parsons 'good copy'. Throughout the eighties and into the nineties Parsons has been at the forefront of the latest conservative themes of the time. What first appears as little more than the rantings of a saloon bar bigot, having himself had too much to drink, grates precisely because it is only too recognisable a prejudice. Parsons reminds us of this and we don't like it.

Alec Campbell

Safer Sexy: The Guide to Gay Sex Safely, Peter Tatchell, Cassell, £14.99 pbk

This *Lovers Guide* for queers advises us that 'using porn as an aid to jerking off is a totally safe form of sex'. In fact using *Safer Sexy* as an aid to jerking off is a totally safe form of sex because as the jacket tells you: It's sizzling! It's raunchy! It's empowering! And it's true: there are some big dicks and lots of fucking, sucking, rubbing, fisting, licking and piercing. What could be safer? Empowerment for your wrists guys!

And it's patronising! Try this: 'Guys who get rejected but carry on cruising have a higher success rate than those who give up after the first couple of failed attempts.' (p83) A handy tip for all those young gay men who might out of ignorance and the effects of homophobia have tried to find a partner by staying at home instead. Knowledge is power! There are fabulous technicalities about condoms and lube and lots of snappy slogans in the language of the streets.

Like all responsible sex manuals, *Safer Sexy* has 'a thoroughly moral message' (p7). Discover how the gay community has taught the world to protect and survive, and still get a hard on. Guys, you too can make a virtue out of a necessity! Save the world—get into rubber!

Peter Ray

Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World System, Immanuel Wallerstein, Cambridge University Press, £9.95pbk

This collection of essays and articles by the veteran left-wing sociologist covers the period from 1980 to 1994, though it is a testament to Wallerstein's historical sweep that he is just as likely to offer you an analysis of the period from the year 2000 to 2050 as of the period from 1450 to 1648. Wallerstein has often been ticked off for his attempt to look at capitalism as a world system by academics who think that generalisations are futile. But, while *Geopolitics and Geoculture* runs against the narrow grain of recent social theory, Wallerstein is still influenced by the fragmentation of the left. Consequently he ends up celebrating the emergence of the 'new social movements'—sectional middle class pressure groups in reality—that are supposed to have dislodged the working class from its position as the class that can liberate humanity as a whole. Nonetheless Wallerstein's long view yields some good insights into the trajectory of international conflict.

James Heartfield

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