# LIVING MARXISM

**For men and women with balls**

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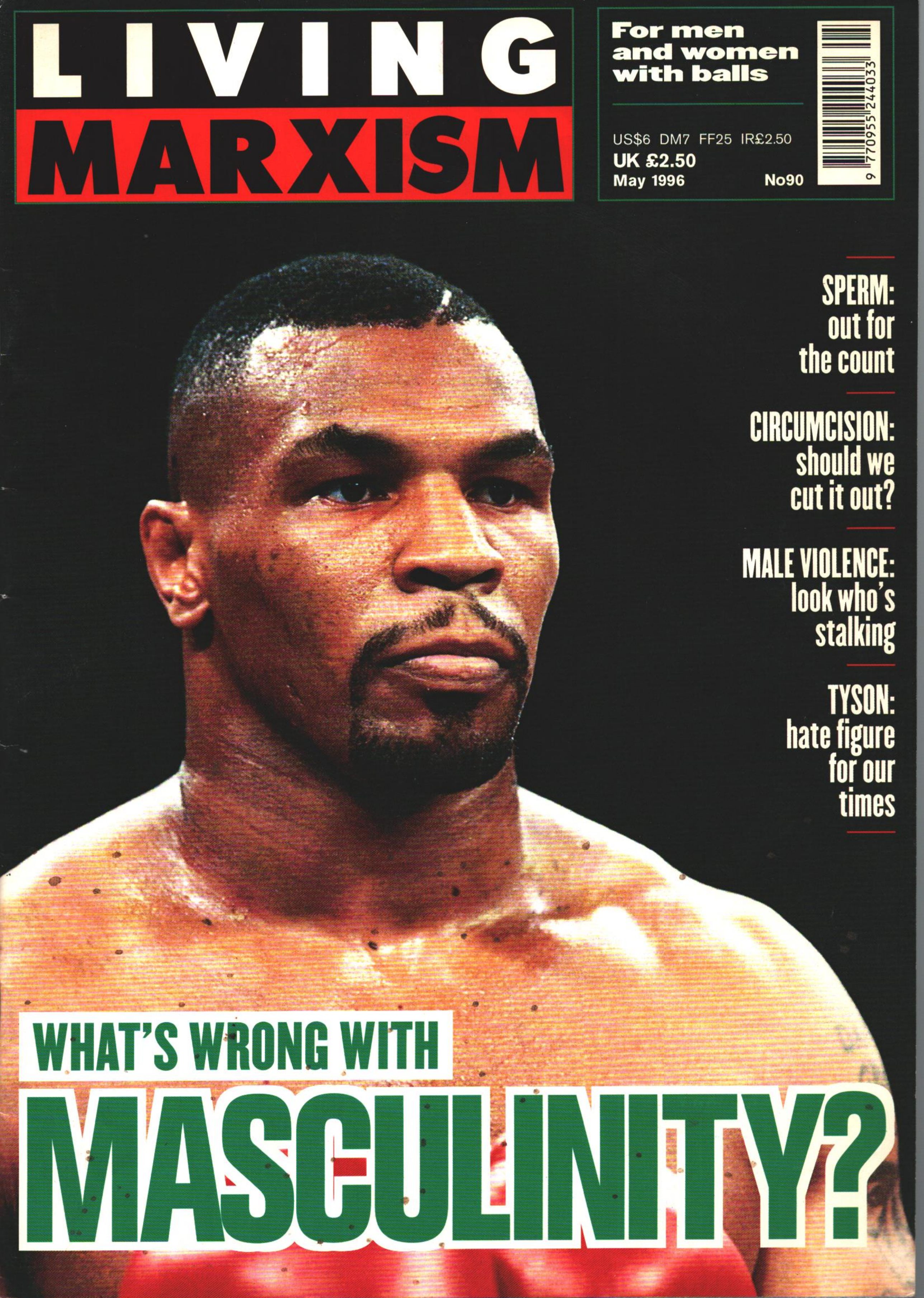

## SPERM: out for the count

## CIRCUMCISION: should we cut it out?

## MALE VIOLENCE: look who's stalking

## TYSON: hate figure for our times

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH MASCULINITY?

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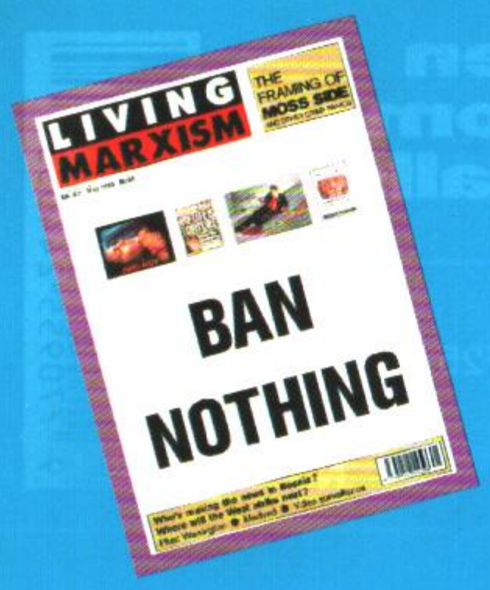


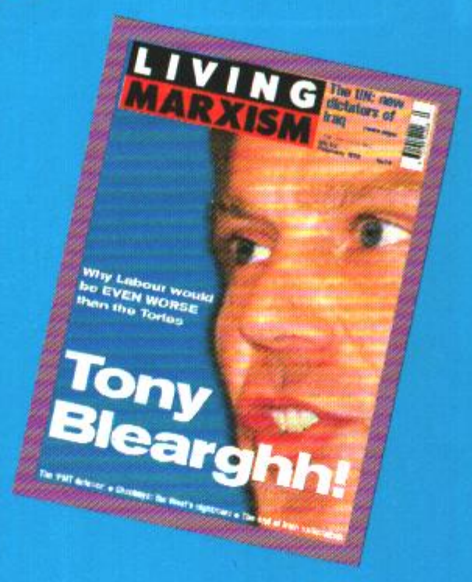



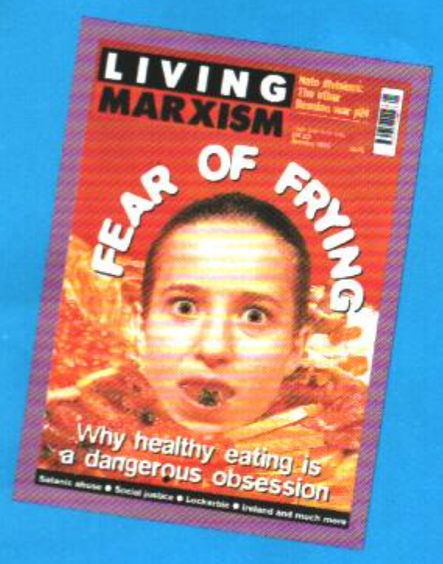



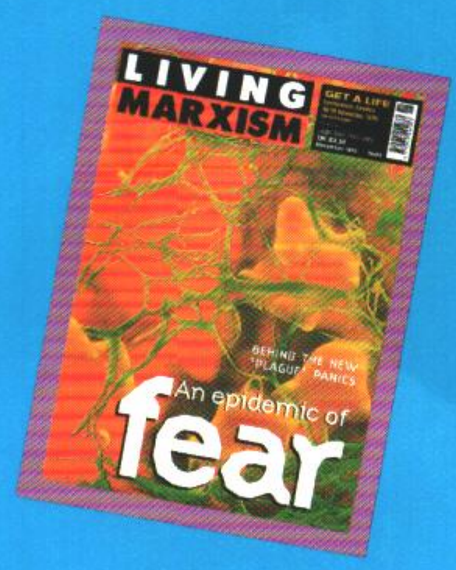


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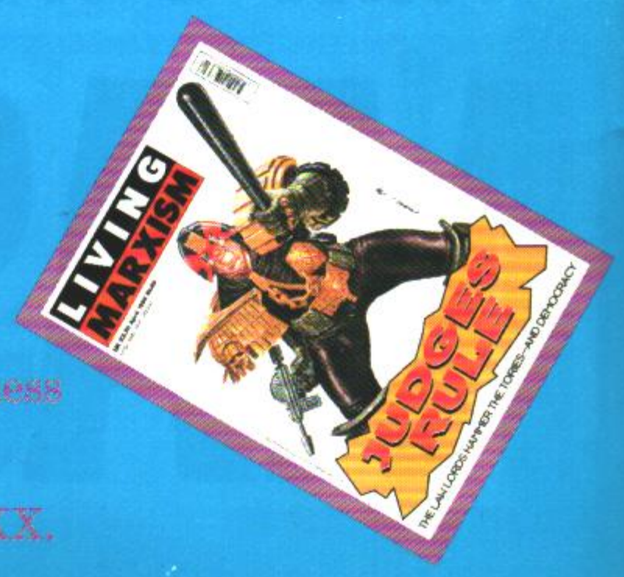


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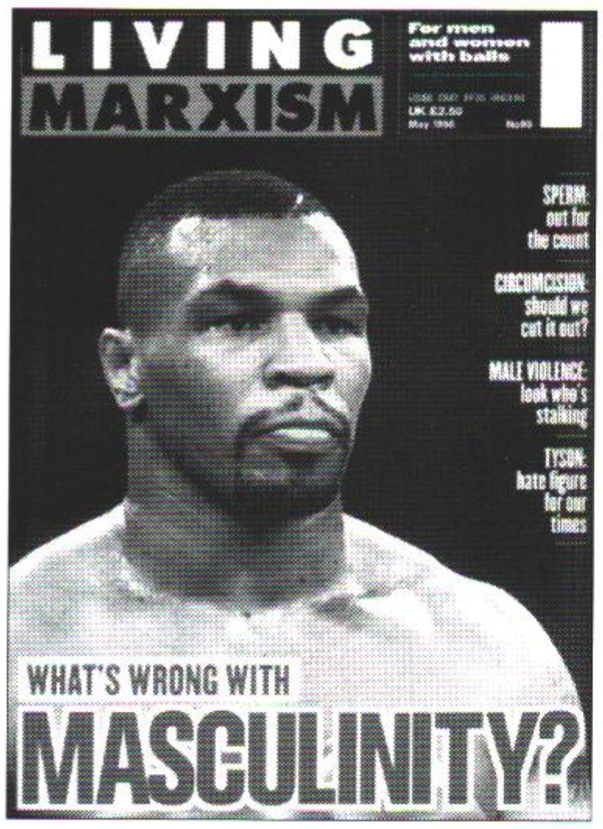


**As the big debate about gender relations and 'the crisis of masculinity' rages on in the media and the universities, *Living Marxism* puts the case for men and women with balls.**

## CIRCUMCISION: should we cut it out?

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More and more men now complain that the experience of being circumcised has damaged them for life. Bob Cohen (Jewish, uncircumcised) advises them to forget about their foreskins.

## LOOK WHO'S STALKING

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Ellie Lee thinks that the campaign for new laws to protect women against male 'stalkers' is an offensive nuisance.

## SPERM: out for the count?

PAGE 18

David Nolan examines the latest panic about men's health—the falling sperm count controversy.

## GRAMEEN BANK

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The Grameen Bank has won worldwide support for its policy of 'empowering' impoverished women in rural Bangladesh. Para Teare from Genderwatch is less impressed.

## THE TROUBLE WITH MEN

PAGE 43

In this month's Marxist Review of Books, Linda Ryan looks at some current developments in the debate about masculinity


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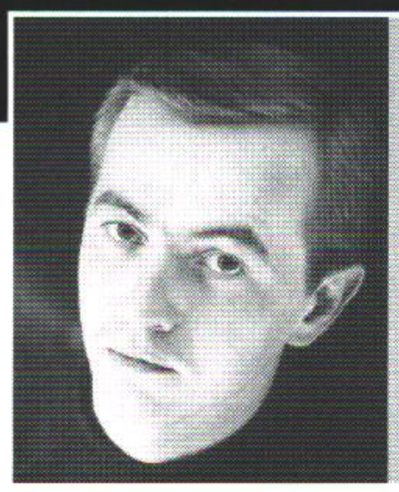


**Mick Hume**

# What's wrong with masculinity?

You do not have to be a ridiculous Iron John from the joke 'men's movement' of the nineties, or a sad old medallion man from the Brut ads of the seventies, to sense that the culture war being waged against masculinity is not as right-on as it might appear.

A heated debate around 'the crisis of masculinity' now rages in newspaper columns, television studios and university seminars. Hardly a day seems to go by without another exposé of the trouble with men. Boys are said to be doing worse than girls at school; men are trailing behind women in the jobs market; sperm counts are reported to be falling; in every department, the male of the species is apparently less physically and emotionally healthy than the female.

It is becoming harder and harder to find depictions of male heroes these days. Those once hailed as military champions are now just as likely to be branded macho thugs. Every male character on British TV, from *Band of Gold* to *Men Behaving Badly*, appears inadequate, weak or evil compared to the decent, sensible or compassionate women around him. Even most of the male heart-throbs of the teen music world seem to look like young girls.

The current discussion of men, women and gender relations goes entirely against the grain of the past 200 years. Throughout much of that time, the conventional wisdom was that men were better at everything. Their strength was supposed to have made them the best leaders, soldiers, managers, writers, drivers, teachers, lovers, doctors, all-rounders. Now the boot is on the other foot.

The perception today is that women are better than men in all the things that matter. There are even suggestions that men are almost inherently inferior in many respects. So, for example, males are apparently falling behind in the fast-moving spheres of education and work because they are incapable of adapting to change, and lack the in-built 'flexibility' which equips females to cope with the new challenges of our times.

Women today are even said to exhibit superior qualities in the traditional bastions of male supremacy. Some argue that their caring, nurturing nature will make women better soldiers than aggressive men in an age when militarism is supposed to be more about peacekeeping than warmongering. Others claim that women's caring feminine qualities now make them better doctors, drivers or managers than men. Even the head of the international football federation, Fifa, has suggested that 'the future is female', with the delicate skills of women players apparently set to flourish as thuggish tackles are eliminated from the game.

Taken at face value, it would be easy enough to endorse the assault on macho caricatures and wankers, especially when it is presented as a vindication of feminist campaigning. But take a step back and look again.

Could it really be the case that men are now so useless at absolutely everything? Why should the accusation of inferiority, which women have bridled at for years, suddenly be accepted as sensible where men are concerned? Those of a critical mind always insisted on questioning the old prejudiced assumptions about women. So today, when the situation is reversed, they should surely want to interrogate the new assumptions about men.

There is a highly questionable idea behind the current discussion. The implication is not just that many men are failures, but that they are failing because they have a fatal flaw: their masculinity. The influence of masculinity is supposed to make men insensitive, inflexible, arrogant and ultimately violent, and so unsuited to succeed in the nineties.

The sophisticated critics of masculinity today would reject the crude determinism of traditional conservatives, who argued that there was a biological basis to the different roles which the sexes played in society. Instead, the modern critics describe masculinity as a 'social construction', created through the conditioning which boys and men receive via the education system, the media, their families and peers.

Yet their theories of 'masculinity in crisis' presuppose the certainty that there is such a thing as masculinity; in other words, that there exists a definite set of attitudes and behaviour patterns which are common among and particular to men. The unspoken assumption that there is an essentially fixed quality to masculinity at any time comes close to echoing the old biological arguments as to why men and women behave as they do. But why should today's notion that men are in essence violent and greedy be any more legitimate than yesterday's reactionary rubbish about the 'naturally' submissive character of little women? (For a fuller discussion of these theories, see page 43.)

Seen from this critical standpoint, the 'crisis of masculinity' discussion can be

# EDITORIAL

interpreted in a new light. It is not really about men and women at all. Instead, masculinity has been set up as a straw man, to be knocked down in pursuit of another agenda altogether.

The debate is really about the society in which we live, and what we can expect of it. The attitudes now being criticised as 'male values' are generally those which have been associated with forward-looking, successful societies. So the will to get on and achieve something is now frowned upon as greed; the aspiration to take control of affairs and make tomorrow different than today is derided as aggression and domination.

These thrusting attitudes can be labelled 'masculine' because historically it has usually been men who went out and did the business, while women were confined to the domestic sphere. But in truth they are no more peculiarly masculine than doing the washing up is a naturally 'feminine' activity. The desire for power, control and change has driven all of human society forward. The real reason why these desires are now being criticised as outdated is because capitalist society has ground to a halt, and can no longer hope to fulfil such aspirations.

In these circumstances, the feminist critique of acquisitive, aggressive masculine values provides the perfect language in which the powers that be can hope to persuade us to reconcile ourselves to the lower horizons and more homely ambitions traditionally associated with a woman's view of the world. The way that the spread of flexible working is celebrated as a victory for women is an example. Now job insecurity and poor conditions of the sort once suffered mainly by women are held up as a gain for the whole workforce.

The degree to which the critique of masculinity serves an apologetic role for capitalism is demonstrated by the current high-profile campaign against the use of 'male violence', by everybody from partners to stalkers, to exercise power over women. Such violence, and the unequal power relations between men and women which underpin it, is now offered as an explanation for a variety of social problems, from marital breakdown and child abuse to inner-city deprivation.

Yet the big furore about violence and unequal power relations always seems to centre on men at the bottom of society. The focus is exclusively on interpersonal power and violence between individual men and women. But the kind of men most often held up as the epitome of 'male violence' today, like the jobless youths hanging around on desolate housing estates waiting for the next documentary film crew to arrive, are in truth just about the most powerless people in the country, with the least ability to dominate the lives of others.

Real power is not about interpersonal relations. It is exercised at the level of society, by those few who can press the buttons in the City of London and create a financial crisis, or issue a statement from the board of Barclays announcing a thousand redundancies, or instruct the Home Office to arm the Metropolitan Police with CS gas and more machine guns, or send in the British army to kill several hundred people during a 'peacekeeping' operation in the former Yugoslavia.

These people's power and their capacity for violence is not determined by their testosterone levels, but by the ownership and control of capital. Yet this social power to control people's lives is invisible and unmentioned in the current debate. Instead attention focuses on the problem of 'male violence' as a phenomenon detached from any real power base in society, as if the brute within men was the modern equivalent of religious evil. The consequence of tarring men in general with this brush is to let those few who really have the power get off scot-free; indeed the legal and policing powers of those at the top are likely to be increased in order to cage the male beasts said to be roaming around at the bottom.

What is presented as a radical critique of masculinity and male values is really a conservative attack upon anybody who wants to stand up and fight for change, or who demands more power and control over their life today. This is clear in the way that the anti-masculinity arguments can be turned against ambitious women, too.

Last year, for instance, the editor of *She* magazine announced that she was retiring because she did not feel able to balance being a mother with her job. It was a graphic illustration of the extent to which the domestic demands which are still placed on women can get in the way of the most high-flying career. Yet the reaction of most feminist commentators was to revel in her decision. They greeted it as confirmation that the emotional ties to hearth and home are more important to women than what Janet Street Porter recently criticised as 'male notions of power'—that is, the real influence in the outside world that can be exercised by the editor of a major magazine.

The net result of the attack on masculinity is to scapegoat men for the problems of society, and to demean women as helpless victims in need of constant protection. What is presented as a critique of masculine values and male violence is at root a demand for passivity, docility and acquiescence to the status quo. It is a manifesto for a world in which the male eunuch becomes a role model. If we are to change things for the better what we need instead are more men and women with balls.

# LETTERS

## The merits of diversity

'The more universally we can communicate, the more dynamic our culture will be' ('Tongue-tied', March). This is true, but Kenan Malik seems to think that a world dominated by American culture would 'allow us to expand our own horizons and become more universal in our outlook'. Cultural diversity does not prevent this, indeed it encourages a universality by providing a sense of place in the world from which we can embrace all other cultures. Without cultural diversity there would be no context for us to 'expand' from; there would be no horizons left.

American cultural imperialism is infiltrating the world at a great rate. Nine McDonalds open everyday worldwide, the subjective viewpoint of the US media is beamed across the world via satellite, and films from Hollywood dominate the world's cinemas. Nowhere is American culture more apparent than in youth cultures. Youth across the world aspire to Coke, Marlboro and Ronald McDonald. The star-spangled banner should not be held up as an icon for worship.

It is with the rise of a global media culture that those with the wealth and technological means to spread their own culture have begun to dominate the world stage. It is something that should be feared but sadly cannot be resisted.
**Benjamin Hesse** *London*

## Ethical capitalism

Michael Barratt Brown (letters, April) in responding to Andy Clarkson's review of his book *Africa's Choices: After 30 Years of the World Bank* (Marxist Review of Books, March) mounts a remarkable defence of his radical credentials: 'it is not my aim to make "Western business"..."more moral", but rather to challenge its very assumptions, not because they work through the market but because they are capitalist assumptions'.

But what are the 'capitalist assumptions' that Barratt Brown wishes to criticise, if not the necessity of working 'through the market'? As far as I can see, Barratt Brown can only be referring to unethical or immoral business practice. In other words, Barratt Brown is criticising 'Western business' for its immorality—Clarkson's point in the first place. Or did I miss something?
**Peter Ray** *London*

## American net-nannies

Many thanks for an excellent article on Net-nannies by Andrew Calcutt ('The Net-nanny state', March). However, he seems to miss an important feature of the Exon amendment and, to a lesser extent, the entire Telecommunications Acts 1996. The issue of censorship is simply one important aspect of this attempt by the US to establish the Internet as American, with no territorial restrictions on the scope of the legislation. The US has been willing to enforce its laws on citizens from other countries in a number of high-profile cases regarding export restrictions and drugs production. A recent court case in the US has already forced the closure of an anonymous remailer in Finland and, armed with this legislation, there is little doubt that America will use legal manoeuvres, import controls and even military muscle to attempt to impose its authority across the world.

The article also compares Net access control software to the V-chip. There is one important difference: there are many alternative Net control packages but only one V-chip. The greatest danger of the V-chip is to apply a single 'morality' on everyone—programmes will be tailored to meet the precise demands of the licensing board, and, of course, to impose the same old prejudices, eg, rating a kiss between members of the same sex as less acceptable than between a man and a woman.
**Chris Condon** *London W3*

## Save the cows

As the BSE scare rages, its chief victims are receiving relatively little attention. I'm talking about the thousands—indeed millions—of peaceful creatures who are not only threatened by a horrible disease but who are now faced by the threat of mass slaughter, 'culling'.

Have the cows brought this upon themselves? Of course not. The BSE epidemic among cows is the fault almost exclusively of humans; of all those who for their own convenience and/or to turn a profit, have allowed horrific things to happen: such as the feeding of contaminated bits of dead cows back to other cows.

Killing millions of animals in panic will not make the problem go away. It is endemic to a system that callously raises and kills animals for profit. We ought to insist that politicians move towards an agriculture wherein cows are treated humanely, not merely as milk and veal and flesh producing machines. There has never been a better time to become a vegetarian! For meat is not only murder; it can also, now, be suicide.
**Rupert Read** *Manchester Metropolitan University*

## Marching straight?

Ian Townson (letters, April) asks why Marxists oppose the ban on homosexuals serving in the military. 'Surely', he asks, 'the cause of democracy and equality cannot be served by fighting for the right to belong to the armed forces of imperialism?'.

The cause of democracy demands that homosexuals are treated equally; that they have the same right as heterosexuals to participate in the public institutions of capitalist society. Marxists are no more sympathetic to the civil service bureaucracy than to the military, but if homosexuals were banned from civil service employment we would oppose that too.

The fact that the British or US military are employed in the service of imperialist barbarism is a separate consideration, and leads Marxists to oppose *anyone* actually serving, at the same time as we oppose the gay ban. So, unlike the mainstream gay movement, we suffer from no temptation to celebrate the glowing service records of homosexual military personnel.
**Andrew Dennison** *Amsterdam*

## Exploiting the innocents

Jan Montague ('Protecting the innocents abroad?', February) claims that Britain would not tolerate the Thai government legislating about what 'anybody can do in London'. Whether or not the Thai government enacts extra-territorial legislation, such legislation would be aimed at its own subjects, not 'anybody' and certainly not British subjects. Similarly, our legislation is aimed at British visitors in Thailand and no others.

Montague says that capitalist exploitation of the Third World is the reason children are driven to prostitution. What Montague fails to point out is that the paedophile is also an agent of exploitation, every bit as rapacious of child labour as abstract capitalism. Instead of condemning tourist paedophilia, Montague appears to link it to other 'petty constraints of British society' from which tourists should be left undisturbed. And *Living Marxism's* choice of illustration, the photo of a child's crotch, places the magazine editorially close to Montague's views.
**Rene Gimpel** *London W2*

## Perverting Popper

To Bill Hughes' criticism (letters, February) of Gillott and Kumar's misinterpretation of Marcuse in *Science and the Retreat from Reason*, I would like to add a further observation. They present deduction as virtually useless and induction as the only progressive method in science, thus implying that Popper was against science because of what he has said against induction. Now, as Gillott and Kumar themselves note, Bacon and Descartes, despite advocating different scientific methodologies, were united in their belief in the positive and progressive potential of science, proving that advocating deduction or criticising induction does not imply being against science—if anything it means believing in it and bothering to argue about scientific methods.

Gillott and Kumar present Popper as a critic of induction, while in fact what he has argued is that induction is a myth, it does not exist.

What inductionists hold are pure empirical facts, from which science is to induce its laws and theories, do not in fact exist prior to human interpretation. In Gillott's and Kumar's example one can conclude from the fact that lots of people are coming from the front of the train with sandwiches that the buffet car is at the front. But they ignore that we can only do this if we already know some law which says that buffet cars have sandwiches, so that we can choose the particular piece of evidence relevant to determining the location of the buffet car.

This just goes to show that in science we can learn a lot even from extreme reactionaries such as Sir Karl, and be misled by progressive thinkers like Gillott and Kumar.

**Chryssa Kanellakis**

## Not so dumb

Kenan Malik's article ('Dumb and dumber', April) on Deep Blue, the artificially intelligent chess program, argues that 'computers' will never be intelligent or have understanding. He joins a long and venerable tradition of those that know the results of scientific inquiry before the work has been done.

Of course, Deep Blue can only play chess and employs 'brute force' forms of reasoning quite unlike human chess players. But to move from this example to the general conclusion of the impossibility of artificial intelligence is quite wrong.

Thinking that thinking may be mechanical needn't be anti-human. Humans are indeed special, so special they can investigate themselves and then build machines that replicate their capabilities. The progression from saving physical labour to saving intellectual labour should be celebrated by Marxists, not derided.

**Ian Wright** *School of Computer and Cognitive Science, University of Birmingham*

## Woodcraft folk

I must comment on the conclusions Bruno Waterfield made concerning the Newbury by-pass protests ('What will voting rock?', April), as well as Wystan Mayes' 'If you go down to the woods today' (April). Waterfield asks 'why don't the protesters campaign for a rational, planned and properly financed system of public transport?'. Individual protesters do campaign for integrated transport policies locally and nationally. In Brighton, London, Leeds and Manchester, polluted city centres are reclaimed from cars. Bicyclists meet monthly in towns and cities across Britain to publicly demonstrate dissatisfaction at the real effects that transport policies have on them in particular. Here in Manchester, Fresh Air Now—a coalition of environmentalists, students, local churches, residents' associations, etc—are standing in local elections because the Labour leadership of the city council refuses to address the causes of air pollution in Manchester, the worst in the UK.

Local campaigns these may well be, but they are organised in the context of national and international networking where ideas, experiences and resources are constantly exchanged. The road protests at Newbury are part of a coherent strategy—'a new kind of radical grassroots movement', to coin a phrase. Living up trees on the planned route may appear wacky, but it makes sure that the Department of Transport finds building unwarranted roads more difficult. That may change the way orthodox politics works, and it's more than *Living Marxism* magazines will do.

**Joseph Ryan** *Manchester*

## Poetically incorrect

It is a rare thing for poetry to find its way into the columns of *Living Marxism*, so it was nice to see Wystan Mayes' article on the Newbury by-pass ('If you go down to the woods today', April) prefaced by some lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'Inversnaid'. This poem, Wystan tells us, was a childhood favourite; childhood memory, however, seems to have been relied upon for the purposes of quotation.

It is bad enough, in just four lines of verse, to find three errors of punctuation and one of spelling. But what is one to make of the substitution, twice repeated, of 'wilderness' for 'wildness'? The intrusion of an extra syllable into Hopkins' rhythms does not, I think, enhance the original. Where neither memory nor an ear for cadence may be relied upon, a reference to the text is to be recommended.

As it happens, Hopkins wrote a poem more closely related to the subject of cutting down trees. 'Binsey Poplars, felled 1879' contains the lines, 'O if we but knew what we do/ When we delve or hew—/ Hack and rack the growing green!'. For those last three words substitute 'poor Hopkins' verse' and you have my sentiments entirely.

**Louis Ryan** *London*

## Seventh hell?

After seeing *Seven* I did not leave the cinema with the 'mood of nihilism and despair' which overcame Alan Harding ('Hell on Earth', March). True, there is a contemporary cynicism too ready to accept that humanity can sink to any depravity. However *Seven* was a film to challenge that perception, not reinforce it.

Morgan Freeman's character Somerset cannot agree that the world is a beautiful place. Despite that, he comes to agree with Brad Pitt's character Mills that the world is worth fighting for. Mills argues that Somerset is merely excusing his own withdrawal from society by crediting John Doe with being the rule, rather than the debased exception. Somerset reconnects his intelligence to the task of changing real life. Director David Fincher allows for the audience's capacity to reject nihilism and despair, and does not deserve to be forced into Harding's tenuous proposition.

**Ian Adams** *Newcastle*

## Sad columnist

I and some friends of mine have been reading *Living Marxism* for a few years now and find it both informative and stimulating. However, we are all in agreement that Toby Banks' monthly column is an utter waste of space. In his attempt to be trendy and topical, Banks is consistently unfunny. I would guess that he is somewhat past it—his column smacks of someone middle class and middle-aged attempting to be with-it and cool. Very sad.

**Ren 'Stimpy' Daniels** *Kilburn, London*

## NZ calling SA

I am currently working on some material to do with the changes in South Africa, and am interested in hearing from Marxists there about the policies being implemented by the ANC-NP government, especially the new labour legislation which should be entering parliament soon. I can be contacted at PO Box 513, Christchurch, New Zealand, or by e-mail at the address below.

**Philip Ferguson**
*p.ferguson@student.canterbury.ac.nz*

# 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 editor@junius.co.uk

# Two tragedies

## Frank Füredi on how the murder of children was turned into a political crusade for national unity

There were two tragedies at Dunblane. There was the terrible tragedy of the murdered children, and their friends and family left distraught by this appalling act. And there was the tragedy of a society desperately clinging on to this event to remind itself that it still had sufficient solidarity to react and speak with one voice.

The loss of children, especially through such violent circumstances, cannot but provoke a profound sense of sorrow. Most of us reacted with revulsion and anger at the murderer and with sympathy for the victims. Unfortunately, British society refused to leave it at that. Instead of allowing those directly affected to get on with their grieving in private, Dunblane was claimed by the media and the political elite as a major public event.

Parliamentary frontbenchers from all parties visited Dunblane, ostensibly speaking on behalf of the nation. This intervention transformed the tragedy into a political event. What began as genuine concern for the victims and their families was twisted into a self-congratulatory discourse about the spirit of solidarity demonstrated by a caring nation. Within a few days of the tragedy, the discussion was about the exemplary way in which the people of Dunblane and the nation as a whole had reacted to the traumatic experience. This response to the massacre, rather than the killings themselves, became the central subject of media concern. Dunblane was transformed into a moral story, in which for once, in the end, good triumphed over evil.

Must the murder of people have some meaning? The act of an out-of-control misfit no doubt has roots in his autobiography. But it is unlikely to have any wider social significance. Such acts of random violence are extremely rare. To give such an act a wider meaning, to present it as symbolic of evil and violent times, is not only to overreact, but also to confuse extraordinary with banal forms of violence.

And yet the media seemed determined to endow the tragedy of Dunblane with some existential meaning. Such a reaction is understandable from Ron Taylor, the headmaster of Dunblane Primary. His immediate reaction was one of anguish and pain. 'Evil visited us yesterday. We don't know why, we don't understand it and I guess we never will', was his verdict. These emotional remarks were seized upon by a press determined to explore the meaning of evil.

In the *Guardian,* Henry Porter observed that 'the murders of Dunblane and the use of the word evil have tested the liberal conscience more than anything else in the last 50 years' (16 March 1996). Writing in the *Sunday Times,* Joan Bakewell noted that only religion could explain the quality of evil that prevailed in this incident (17 March 1996). Others pointed to the dangers of lonely men, isolated in modern society, while many more criticised the violence of television and the media for stimulating the evil thoughts of a Thomas Hamilton. Still others, like Andrew Neil of the *Sunday Times,* pointed the finger at dysfunctional families: 'badly broken families are the fastest-growing social unit: we are watching the creation of the breeding grounds for tomorrow's thugs and killers.' (17 March 1996) Somehow, in a matter of a day, a very personal and human tragedy faced by the families of the murdered children was transformed into a statement about some transcendental evil facing society as a whole.

### Crocodile tears

The representation of Dunblane as a moral tale is symptomatic of the difficulty that society has in making sense of itself and its problems today. It was as if, through Dunblane, British society was talking to itself about the state of the nation. As the discussion shifted from the specifics of the tragedy towards its wider meaning for us all, Dunblane was converted into a myth about British virtue. Numerous observers emphasised that the public response to Dunblane revealed what is best in the British character.

The celebration of Britishness through Dunblane was clearly and grotesquely expressed by Stephen Glover in the *Telegraph:*

> 'Our reaction to the massacre at Dunblane shows more eloquently than anything else could that we are the same people inhabiting the same country, for all the contrary ambitions of the Scottish nationalists. The ties that bind us together are tighter than we thought.' (15 March 1996)

For Glover, the experience of Dunblane had in some sense been a rewarding one. 'We have watched the tragic spectacle', he concluded, 'and in an odd way it has become an ennobling experience, as well as a horrifying one'. Here, the image of a nation pulling together in the manner of the Dunkirk spirit, becomes the main focus for a campaign of national renewal.

It seems that the sighting of evil in Dunblane is but a prelude to the far more significant discovery that Britain can still speak with one voice. Through the invocation of evil, the meaning of national virtue can finally begin to acquire shape.

### Religious task force

The carefully constructed representation of a nation that stands up for good against evil, is testimony to the erosion of community and solidarity in Britain. A society that was confident about itself and knew clearly what is right and what is wrong, would not have to congratulate itself about the fact that it was outraged by the murder of 16 children and their teacher. The importance attached to the public's reaction to this tragedy suggests that in less extraordinary incidents, a common response is less likely.

What pleased many commentators and politicians is that people who do not normally react together, appeared to be saying similar things in relation to Dunblane. From this perspective, Dunblane has helped society to discover ties that bind it together. For many observers, especially those concerned with the decline of community, Dunblane represents a flicker of hope. This was clearly the view that prevailed among religious leaders. It was in this vein that Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England called for a task force of religious leaders, teachers, judges and leaders of voluntary organisations to help revitalise morality. 'Britain needs a moral map for an era of unprecedented and destabilising changes as it faces the new millennium', he said in a lecture

PHOTO: PRESS ASSOCIATION

# at Dunblane

at Manchester Business School (21 March 1996).

For Sacks, Dunblane had a special significance as a moment when we caught sight of Britain as it truly is: 'not a nation of individuals living disconnected lives in pursuit of self-interest, but a people united by a sense of fellow feeling.' Seen in this light, Dunblane is not so much a tragedy, but an affirmation of Britain at its best. For Sacks, the reaction to Dunblane provides a model to be emulated by others.

The intervention of the Archbishop of Canterbury was surprisingly similar to the Chief Rabbi's. For Archbishop Carey, Dunblane provides an opportunity to attack the individualisation and relativisation of morality. Carey is concerned that there is no longer a consensus on what is right and wrong, and sees the pluralisation of morality as symptomatic of the erosion of social cohesion. That is why for him, Dunblane had a welcome side:

'We also know that compassion, love and solidarity and, in the aftermath of Dunblane, the faithful devotion of parents and teachers towards children in their care, are more than "nice". They are absolutely good. Let us build on these and constantly challenge the false idea that right and wrong are what each one of us happens to feel about it.' (*Daily Mail,* 25 March 1996)

Here, Dunblane provides the foundation for reconstructing a morality which can confidently advocate absolute values.

What is truly tragic is that neither Sacks nor Carey ever asks the question of what kind of a society needs the murder of 16 children to get a common public reaction. The spirit of solidarity must be very weak if such extraordinary events as the tragedy at Dunblane are needed to bring to the surface a common response.

Is it too far fetched to draw the conclusion that the British elite needs a Thomas Hamilton to remind society that it has some common values? From the response to Dunblane, what emerges is a society that is ill at ease with itself. There are tragedies and there are tragedies. The tragedy that affects us all, not just today but for some time to come, is that British society has an insatiable appetite for victims and horrific crimes. It is only in response to such events that it can feel, at least momentarily, moral and virtuous. Bring on the next moral spectacle. ●

**Frank Füredi is convening the course *Redrawing the Boundaries of Humanism* at The Week conference in July (see page 31).**


# Circu

## More and more men now complain that the experience of being circumcised as a baby has damaged them for life. Bob Cohen (Jewish, uncircumcised) advises them to forget about their foreskins

**Six months ago,** when my son was born, I was faced with the choice of whether or not to have him circumcised. As an uncircumcised Jewish man, I often resented the fact that my parents decided against this operation. When I was a kid, I was the odd one out. An intact foreskin was a bit of a novelty, and not only among my Jewish friends; in America circumcision was *de rigeur* among middle class white gentiles too.

My father had decided against my being circumcised because wartime experiences in 1940s Germany had left him with an instinct that it did not make much sense to advertise the fact that you were a Jew. I felt ambivalent. As a lifelong atheist the Jewish tradition meant nothing to me anyway; but growing up in a culture where it was important to be proud to be Jewish in the face of underlying anti-Semitism, abandoning circumcision did not seem like a good compromise to make.

In the end our baby son was spared the knife. My non-Jewish partner was indifferent and I, distracted by the drama of our new arrival, decided against any additional hassle. Now, however, watching the growth of a bizarre campaign against circumcision, I am inclined to wish I had gone ahead on principle.

Earlier this year the *British Medical Journal* published a letter signed by 20 men who have apparently set up a kind of victim support group for men who were circumcised in childhood —Norm UK. Their letter opens with the declaration that 'We are all adult men who believe that we have been harmed by circumcision carried out in childhood by doctors in Britain'. They do not actually indicate how they have been harmed, but it is easy enough to get the gist of their complaint from the line put out by similar men's groups in the USA. They argue that they feel psychologically damaged and mutilated by circumcision, and they believe that sex for them is less satisfying than it should be as a permanently exposed glans becomes less sensitive.

It seems a strange complaint. One of the reasons why I always wished I had been circumcised was because of the received wisdom (myth) in my adolescent days that circumcised men made better lovers precisely because they took longer to come. However, the guys in Norm UK feel sufficiently strongly about their lack of foreskin that some of them are trying to reconstruct the missing bits. Bizarre practices with weights and surgical tape are apparently being performed in an attempt to restretch the foreskin, using a method which plastic surgeons call tissue-expansion.

Obviously if a group of men want to dangle weights from the end of their penises, they should be allowed to hang loose without objections from anybody else. After all, we all have our sexual idiosyncrasies. But there is something deeply worrying about the fact that infant circumcision is now being turned into yet another issue of abuse.

**Norm UK argues** that circumcision infringes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is calling for medical organisations to adopt policies declaring circumcision to be ethically unacceptable. Instead of this view being treated with the incredulity it deserves, it seems in danger of becoming received wisdom.

Men's magazines, most recently *Maxim,* have carried sympathetic articles featuring the findings of American psychologist Jim Bigelow, author of *The Joy of Uncircumcising! Restore Your Birthright and Maximise Your Sexual Pleasure*. The *Guardian* reported accounts of circumcised men who complained that their ability to enjoy sex had been impaired, who ▶

# mcision: should we cut it out?

felt 'a sense of mutilation and of loss'. Channel 4 commissioned a documentary to show what can and does (rarely) go wrong during the procedure. Far from simply being a media panic, the case against circumcision is now firmly established within the medical profession. As one doctor pointed out to me during my deliberations, it is now almost impossible to have your son circumcised on the NHS, and raising the issue would probably be enough

## Lots of men—circumcised or not—have unsatisfying sex

to have him listed on the at-risk register. Circumcision is fast being defined as a form of child abuse. It is surely only a matter of time before somebody invents a 'post-circumcision trauma' or a 'circumcision-syndrome'.

I can accept the medical argument that circumcision probably confers little if any health benefits. Many of the arguments used to justify circumcision in England and North America in the past have now been refuted. The reduced incidence of cervical cancer in women who live in cultures where circumcision is routinely practised is no longer thought to be due to circumcision itself, but to other social factors. Nor is circumcision any longer thought to be the key to male genital hygiene. So I can accept that there is probably no good medical reason to circumcise newborn baby boys. But I cannot accept that circumcision screws men up for life.

**If circumcision is** the terribly traumatic experience it is now said to be, then tell me this. Why is it only now that we discover that one of the earliest operations recorded in history apparently has such devastating psychological effects?

The furore over circumcision is one more example of the irresistible urge to attribute adult insecurities to the legacy of childhood experience. The trend now is to blame all of our problems on our past experience, rather than the circumstances we find ourselves in today. This is certainly convenient. If you blame yesterday's horrors for today's failures, it is possible to remove any responsibility from yourself. You become a helpless prisoner of your past, unable to do anything about the problems in your life.

Take the example of sexual satisfaction. If you are unhappy with your sex life and you understand the problem is something to do with your technique, your partner's technique or your relationship—you can do something about it. If, however, the problem is due to the removal of your foreskin without your consent several decades ago—there is not very much you can do about it. The problem is not you, it is your body, as abused by others. You are a victim of your circumstances, something somebody did to you in your infancy. And, of course, because there is nothing you can do about it, you are absolved of any reason to try to take control of your circumstances and resolve your problem.

I honestly think this is nothing more than a cop-out, an evasion of responsibility. Lots of men—circumcised or not—have unsatisfying sex (as do lots of women). 'Medicalising' the cause of it is a way for some men to avoid having to face up to the fact that there might be something they could do for themselves. 'It's no use—it's something the doctor did to me all those years ago.'

**Any study of** the relationship between sexual satisfaction and circumcision would probably show that sad men who have been circumcised would claim that they are victims. Happy men who have been circumcised would no doubt claim, as did many of my friends, that their lack of a foreskin makes them more attractive to women. In reality, it is unlikely that the state of their foreskins has much to do with anything.

My suspicions that blaming circumcision for bad sex is nothing more than a cop-out is supported by a comment attributed to the aforementioned author Jim Bigelow in *Maxim.* Jim apparently believes that 'the lack of skin mobility of the circumcised penis often means that a man is forced to thrust in a way that may prove abrasive leaving both partners sore'. Really? I don't think so.

An admittedly unscientific *vox pop* of women friends with sexual experience of circumcised and uncircumcised men confirms that there is no association between 'abrasive thrusting' and the lack of a foreskin, just as there is no association between 'abrasive thrusting' and baldness or 'abrasive thrusting' and a university education. This is so obvious that it almost defies discussion. If circumcision makes for bad sex, why is it only such a tiny minority of men (and women) who are complaining about it?

Could it be that those men suffering so greatly from their circumcision are nothing more than putative victims in search of a reason for victimhood? It seems significant that the new concern about male circumcision has arisen in the context of a more widespread concern about female circumcision; that male genital mutilation has been put forward as a 'me-too' version of what is widely discussed as female genital mutilation.

It seems fairly standard now that when an issue of women's health is identified there is an immediate search for a male equivalent. So breast self-examination is mirrored by testicular self-examination, and the notion of the male menopause is treated seriously in books on men's health—some doctors will even provide a male version of hormone replacement therapy. There is even an emerging discussion about male post-natal depression.

Some people will no doubt argue that there is something progressive about men becoming increasingly aware of their bodies in general and their genitals in particular. Norm UK has been praised for speaking out about a supposedly taboo subject—men's insecurities about their bodies. In fact men's insecurities about their bodies, particularly about their genitals, have never been the stuff of taboo—quite the opposite. 'Is my/your dick big enough/straight enough/thick enough?' has been the subject of locker-room banter for as long as there have been locker rooms. Of course, men are insecure about their penises. But in the past we have usually realised that it is necessary to put such private worries about our privates to one side, and get on with doing the job and making a success of it.

**There is nothing** progressive about the new preoccupation with various parts of men's bodies. It is typical of the trend for people to become obsessed with the private and the petty. The danger is that if we waste our time staring at our navels or our knob-ends in the mirror, we will lose sight of what is happening in the world outside our bathrooms. There are women I know who have spent years battling to defy the idea that they should only worry about personal health and family problems, and leave the big issues of the day to others. It is ironic that, through the new fascination with body issues like circumcision, men are now being advised to lower their sights in similar fashion.

I guess that by not circumcising my son I have deprived him of an excuse for life. Perhaps he will just have to grow up believing that well-worn phrase: 'it's not what you've got, but how you use it.' If he also grows up believing 'it's what you do, not what's been done to you' I suspect that he will be a better man for it. ●

ANN BRADLEY

# Abort this adoption bill

Sometimes the government makes such staggeringly stupid proposals that you wonder whether it even lives on the same planet as the rest of us. The latest ideas about reforming the law on adoption are a case in point.

It is true that the law on adoption is a messy dog's breakfast. But the government's recommendations for change are motivated by its own propaganda concerns, rather than designed to meet the needs of people trying to adopt.

The health ministry has talked benignly about making it easier to bring together couples who want children and children in need of parents. Who could possibly object to that? Well, me for one. I find the terms in which the debate is being posed completely objectionable.

The agenda being pursued here has got little to do with adoption. Having expended a lot of energy at Tory Party conferences and in television studios banging on about the problem of single parenthood, the government has reached the point where it needs to be seen to be doing something about it. The 'practical' solution it has come up with is to get unmarried women to give their babies to childless couples.

Health minister John Bowis has even said that making adoption easier will help to make it 'a valid and acceptable alternative to abortion'. He is concerned that since the legalisation of abortion the number of infants available for adoption has steadily decreased, as women seek to end pregnancies before the birth rather than give away their child after it. I cannot understand why Bowis has a problem with this. He is deeply mistaken if he believes that a woman chooses abortion because of the bureaucratic red tape involved in adoption.

**They want unmarried women to give their babies to childless couples**

Women have abortions because they do not want to be pregnant. I am often involved in debates with anti-choice activists who argue that adoption offers a woman an alternative to abortion, and it always makes me wonder if they have ever met a pregnant women.

Pregnancy is not an easy condition to live with when you are looking forward to your baby. It involves a total suspension of self-interest. There cannot be an antenatal class in the country which has not had the 'Is it worth it?' discussion. Of course it is, if you want a baby. But to expect a woman to endure the morning sickness, backache, the poverty of life on maternity benefits, possible loss of her job, and the agony of labour to produce a child she does not want is unreasonable and unrealistic. It is not surprising that in 1991 fewer than 1200 babies under a year old were given up for adoption.

It is unbelievable that politicians like Bowis can look back nostalgically to times when women with unwanted pregnancies carried to term and handed over their babies. The overwhelming majority of those women endured what was then the only possible resolution to their problem with the greatest heartache. The fall in the number of women choosing to have a baby which would be adopted once the alternative of abortion became available shows just how unacceptable it was.

I think Bowis and his colleagues know this. They understand that changing the adoption rules will not cause one woman to decide to choose adoption over abortion. The abortion rate, which Bowis says he is concerned about, will not fall a fraction as a result. Although, paradoxically, it is falling anyway as a result of other trends—one of them being the increased acceptability of single motherhood outside the Tory cabinet.

If the government was honest, it would admit that this is what it is really concerned about. The top Tories do not really have a problem with abortion; they might not like it much but it is tolerated as a necessary evil, especially where it prevents children being born to the 'wrong' kind of mothers. They do, however, have a problem with what they perceive to be a growing number of women choosing to start families on state benefits. And as it is out of the question for them to promote abortion as a legitimate solution, the adoption option is wheeled out.

The real aim behind the draft bill of adoption is betrayed by official comments that it may help provide an alternative to teenage motherhood, and that families from ethnic minorities are to be encouraged to consider adoption. The amendments are intended not so much to provide an alternative to abortion as an alternative to single mothers—especially young single mothers, and particularly young, (black) single mothers on benefit.

The most insidious proposed change in the adoption rules are those that would give courts the power to override natural parents who refuse consent to adoption, where a judge is satisfied that such action is in the interests of the child. A clause which effectively extends the state's right to decide who should and should not be allowed to rear children.

Over the past decade adoption has shifted from being a way of placing new babies to a way for the social services to remove children from families where they are thought to be 'at risk'. Adoption has become a mechanism for state intervention in the family, and the proposed bill is designed to make this easier.

The adoption bill may not become law in its present draft form, even though the Labour Party is backing it. But even before being debated, it has served to problematise abortion and win a consensus that the social services need more powers to remove children from families. Perhaps government ministers aren't such bad propagandists after all. The bill serves their purposes, even if it does nothing to make life easier for women with unwanted pregnancies. ●

# Look who's stalking

Ellie Lee thinks that the campaign for new laws to protect women against male 'stalkers' is an offensive nuisance

**The menace of** 'stalking' is the latest focus for those campaigning against male violence. To coincide with International Women's Week in March, Labour MP Janet Anderson put a bill to parliament that called for 'stalking' to be made a specific criminal offence. Anderson claims that the lives of many women in Britain today are being made a misery through persistent attention from obsessive men. She wants the law changed to protect women from the threat of stalkers.

Keen to promote their 'women-friendly' credentials, support for an anti-stalking law has been voiced not just by New Labour and feminist lobbies like Justice for Women, but also by the Police Federation and Conservative MPs. All agree that women are living in fear of stalkers and that something should be done.

The idea that the new focus on 'stalking' can make a positive difference to women's lives is worth questioning. In the first place, why all the fuss? The justification given for prioritising the issue is that stalking is a major problem from which many 'ordinary women' suffer as much as Madonna or members of the royal family. Yet when conjuring up a figure from thin air to support her bill, even Janet Anderson could only claim 5000 women are 'stalked'.

On the scale of things which can ruin women's lives, stalking seems a peculiar choice to make an issue out of. There are many problems which affect the lives of millions of women, like low pay and lack of childcare. In Britain at the moment an estimated 800 000 women earn less than £2.50 an hour, eking out a living on part-time poverty wages, which barely allow them to pay the rent. It is a sign of the times that New Labour had nothing to say on this issue during International Women's Week, and instead 'stalking' stole the limelight.

Elevating 'stalking' into a major issue is not just a distraction from the real problems of the day. The demand for more law to deal with the problem creates dangers in its own right.

Anderson says that a new law on 'stalking' is needed because 'British women who have been stalked are frustrated by the inadequacy of British law'. Her claim that there is not enough law to protect women is shared by women's safety campaigns such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. They suggest that the police are 'practically powerless' to deal with the problem posed by stalkers.

Taking the law in Britain as it stands, it seems difficult to see Anderson's point. There seems to be plenty of law to deal with what any reasonable person would see as the kind of problems that could be created by a 'stalker' (see box opposite for details).

Leaving aside actual physical violence, the possibility of it can already constitute a criminal offence. If there is the threat of violence, the 1986 Public Order Act allows charges to be brought. This law was updated through the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. Under these provisions, there doesn't even have to be the possibility of violence. What someone says can be enough to warrant prosecution. Charges can be brought against 'intentional harassment', which is defined as 'threatening, abusive or insulting words', or displays of 'writing, signs or visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting'. Then there is law against 'malicious' phone calls, and the law against sending 'obscene' letters and parcels.

So women are already protected from threats, from what someone says on the phone and what comes through the letter box. In existing law, criminal behaviour is already defined as not just real violence, but covers what the most ardent feminist campaigner could find objectionable about what a 'stalker' might do to a women.

Why then do Anderson and her supporters still regard all this as insufficient to protect women adequately from the potential threat posed by a 'stalker'? This is because, under existing law, the prosecution has to prove intent to cause harm on the part of the accused. For example, under the provisions of the Public Order Act, a judge would have to know that the 'stalker' intended violence. For malicious phone calls or malicious mail to warrant prosecution, then the sender must be proven to have intended malice.

The anti-stalking lobby believes that a woman should not have to prove intent. Rather her word that the suspected 'stalker' represents a problem for her should be enough. Apparently it should be sufficient that the woman did not like what the 'stalker' did, even if it could not be proved that he intended harm through it.

**The kind of** law that would result from Anderson's approach was indicated by a groundbreaking case against an alleged 'stalker' which coincided with the publication of her bill. In March, Antony Burstow was jailed for three years for causing a woman 'psychological grievous bodily harm' by sending her abusive messages and phone calls. His conviction was hailed as an important precedent by anti-stalking campaigners, who saw it as a step towards a more positive version of the law—one where the harm done to a woman's feelings, the way she experiences things, is taken as the starting point. The 'psychological harm' a women says she has been subject to, not what the 'stalker' actually did or did not do, then becomes the central issue.

As the *Daily Mail* put it, through the Burstow case the courts have 'begun to consider the psychological damage stalkers cause in the same light as physical injury'. It is this change of attitude, through which a woman feeling upset about something is put on a par with being beaten up, that has delighted campaigners so much.

The consequences of conflating 'psychological' and physical damage in this way are important to consider. It means that what someone as an individual feels about what happens to them is made the paramount issue in law. Their subjective interpretation of events is prioritised over the question of what has happened in fact.

**Adopting this approach** means abandoning any objective definition of what represents harm. Commonly agreed definitions about what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour are seen as unimportant. The implication is that someone should be deemed a criminal on the basis not of what they do, not even what they intend to do, but what somebody else feels they are doing or might do. The fears or anxieties in someone's head about the possible threat posed by someone else becomes the starting point for a prosecution.

Once an investigation into the facts of the matter is set aside in this way, an effective defence becomes a near impossibility. If the accused can be found guilty simply because of what the alleged victim says they felt, then how can anybody possibly establish their innocence? The accuser only has to say that they were offended, fearful, or felt 'psychologically damaged' by certain actions, and guilt is effectively proven. Unless the defence lawyers can read the alleged victim's mind, and submit their findings as evidence, they are lost.

The fundamental concept of 'innocent until proven guilty' is called into question here. How can innocence be presumed if there is no commonly agreed definition of what represents harm? If what matters is the interpretation of your actions rather than the actions themselves, then there is no such thing as innocence. After all, who knows how someone else may perceive what you do or say?

Seen from this perspective, the proposal for a new law against 'stalking' looks like a recipe for an even more authoritarian and unjust legal system. Yet those in favour of the measure present their case as the opposite. They say they are for sensitivity and compassion in the law. They want a more 'feminised' law that takes into account the experience women have at the hands of men, and gives that experience the respect it deserves.

The notion that a new law against stalking would demonstrate sensitivity and compassion rests upon an increasingly influential view of what it means to take women seriously. In this view women are portrayed as more sensitive and emotional than men, driven by their feelings and intuition. As a result, they are prone to 'psychological harm', since their mind is likely to be disturbed or damaged quite easily. In this view women suffer from things that the 'masculine' law fails to see as problems. In which case, it is argued, the law must change so as to take women's particular way of experiencing harm into account.

It is astounding that this idea of what women are like can be put forward as 'pro-women'. It is a highly patronising attitude which casts women in the role of feeble little souls, unable to cope with things that men can. As the *Times* said in support of the Burstow ruling, 'it is hard for women to convey to men the fear that can be engendered by the obsessive behaviour of a stalker'. Why would men be unable to understand the experience of a woman? Only if women are expected to react to this behaviour in a way that men would not. Men, it is assumed, would brazen things out, confront the problem and deal with it. Women, by contrast, are expected to be emotionally crippled by their experience. The idea that they could stand up for themselves and deal with things is discounted.

**Jane Austen might** be back in fashion at the cinema, but in the real world the antiquated notion of delicate and fragile 'femininity' is something women can well do without. It is a sign of the times that promoting such an image could come to be seen as something to do with making women's lives better.

If women are cast as pathetic victims, men too are degraded by this approach. If Anderson is ▶

## ⚠ More law?

**In demanding a** law to make 'stalking' a specific offence, anti-stalking campaigners say current law is inadequate to protect women. Here are just some of the laws they are talking about.

- **Public Order Act 1986, section 4**

A person is guilty of an offence if he
uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour with intent to cause a person to believe that immediate unlawful violence will be used, or to provoke immediate unlawful violence.

- **Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, section 154**

A person is guilty of an offence if, with intent to cause a person harassment, alarm or distress, he
a) uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or
b) displays any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting

- **Telecommunications Act 1984, section 43**

A person who
a) sends, by means of a public telecommunication system, a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character; or
b) sends by those means, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another a message that he knows to be false or persistently makes use for that purpose of a public telecommunication system,
shall be guilty of an offence

- **Malicious Communications Act 1988, section 1**

1) Any person who sends another person
a) a letter or any other article which conveys—
i) a message which is indecent or grossly offensive;
ii) a threat; or
iii) information which is false and known or believed to be false by the sender; or
b) any other article which is, in whole or part, of an indecent or grossly offensive nature
is guilty of an offence if his purpose, or one of his purposes in sending it is that it should, so far as falling within paragraph a) or b) above, cause distress or anxiety to the recipient or to any other person to whom he intends that its contents or nature should be communicated.

**All of this** exists separately to laws against physical attack. So the law has already criminalised whole areas of behaviour, on the basis that it causes offence, not physical harm. For anti-stalking campaigners, however, that is not enough. They want a law that criminalises behaviour even where no desire or intent to cause harm or be malicious can be proven.

The implications for widening the powers of the police and law courts to arrest and prosecute in this way are significant. It means someone can be branded a dangerous criminal for hurting or intending to hurt nobody. Yet basic liberties like the presumption of innocence seem to be held in such low esteem today, especially by New Labour, that this redefinition of what constitutes a violent crime can be considered a trivial matter.

◀ right, and men's actions cause harm even if they do not intend it, men must be dangerous indeed. What men think is reasonable behaviour is in fact abusive. Men are assumed to be incapable of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour, insensitive Neanderthals who inevitably behave badly. In which case, the police and the courts must step in to teach them how to behave. If men are incapable of understanding women's sensitivities themselves, and go around making women's lives a misery without knowing it, then the law must intervene.

The end result of this demeaning portrayal of both women and men is the extension of the powers of the state to dictate what anybody can do or say. A sign of what is to come, if current trends go unchallenged, was demonstrated by another ruling in a 'stalking' case earlier this year. Charles Wilson was prosecuted over his obsessive behaviour towards a woman. But to his obvious chagrin, the judge in this case was unable to send Wilson down. The reason given was that 'at no stage did he use violence...he made no threats, he did not abuse her and when he communicated to her by letter, his letters were polite and courteous'. For the judge, this proved the need for more law. In summing up, he said of Wilson 'what he did is commonly known as stalking, and stalking is not in this country, at least, a criminal offence. The sooner it is the better'. The situation is worrying indeed when a judge complains of his inability to jail a man for the crime of sending 'polite and courteous letters' to a woman.

Charles Wilson may well be a creep, but to treat his like as violent criminals sets a precedent that should be seen as a far bigger problem. The only winner in the campaign against 'stalking' will be the long arm of the law. That can provide no benefits for women—but it does represent a threat to the liberty of all of us. ●

**Ellie Lee is convening the course *Policing the Family* at The Week conference in July (see page 31).**

# Are all women victims of male violence?

**'Most women recall** at least one incident of intimate intrusion, where this includes flashing, obscene phone calls, harassment on the street, being followed as well as various forms of physical and sexual assault.' Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence,* quoted in *Peace at Home: A Labour Party Consultation on the Elimination of Domestic and Sexual Violence against Women*

Liz Kelly is an increasingly influential feminist writer and thinker whose followers include Labour front bencher Clare Short. When she says that male violence against women is more widespread than anyone previously thought, it now tends to be accepted without serious question. But look again at that statement, and there are questions worth asking.

Why is it considered sensible to define 'intimate intrusion' so broadly that it puts flashing and obscene phone calls on a par with physical and sexual assault? When I was five I saw a dirty old man in a raincoat. A couple of times I have picked up the phone to hear heavy breathing. But these things are not significant, and have made no difference to my life at all. Yet now they are called 'intimate intrusion' and equated with rape. Why?

The school of thought of which Liz Kelly is a leading member has developed a concept that she calls the 'continuum of male violence'. The concept of a 'continuum of male violence' says that a variety of acts which have been distinguished from each other in the past should in fact be seen as part of the same process. Up to now, for example, most people have looked on rape and flashing as very different. The former is seen as a terrible crime, the latter as a bit of a joke. Kelly says this distinction is misplaced; that both are part of the same 'continuum' and both represent the exertion of control by men over women.

**Kelly believes that** through presenting the situation in this way something useful for women emerges. The distinction between women who are seen as victims and those who are not can be ended. Instead all women can look at themselves in the same way—as victims of 'male violence':

'an important implication of this way of viewing sexual violence is that a clear distinction cannot be made between "victims" and other women....The use of the term "victim" in order to separate one group of women from other women's lives and experience must be questioned.' 'The continuum of sexual violence', in J Hanmer and M Maynard, *Women, Violence and Social Control,* p59

Kelly's aim appears to be to persuade all women that they have been abused at the hands of men, whether they realised it previously or not. In this way a kind of 'sisterhood', where women feel they have something in common can be created.

**But encouragement to** act the victim is the last thing women need. The notion that all women are besieged by the threat of male violence on all sides, all of the time, suggests that a woman cannot even walk down the street without becoming a nervous wreck, never mind act on an equal footing with men in the world. The idea that women might stand up for themselves, and cope with life as independent, confident individuals is called into question.

The problem with Kelly's approach is not just the self-perception it encourages among women. By focusing on 'male violence'—which here includes calling a woman a slag, or pinching her bum—as the main problem facing women, the broader issues confronting women in society are left out of the picture. Petty interpersonal issues, like a man calling a woman names, are elevated at the cost of identifying the major social barriers that stand in the way of women's emancipation. The real power of employers and governments to control women's lives by exploiting them as cheap labour or denying them decent childcare facilities is ignored, while all eyes focus on the negligible power which an individual man might momentarily exert over a women.

**By emphasising the** individual problem of 'male violence', feminist thinkers like Liz Kelly avoid any responsibility for working out a strategy that can liberate women from the limits society imposes on them. They can duck the problem of how to free women from the stranglehold that the government and employers have over their lives. How much easier it is to pontificate about a 'continuum of male violence' and bleat about a man looking at a woman's breasts.

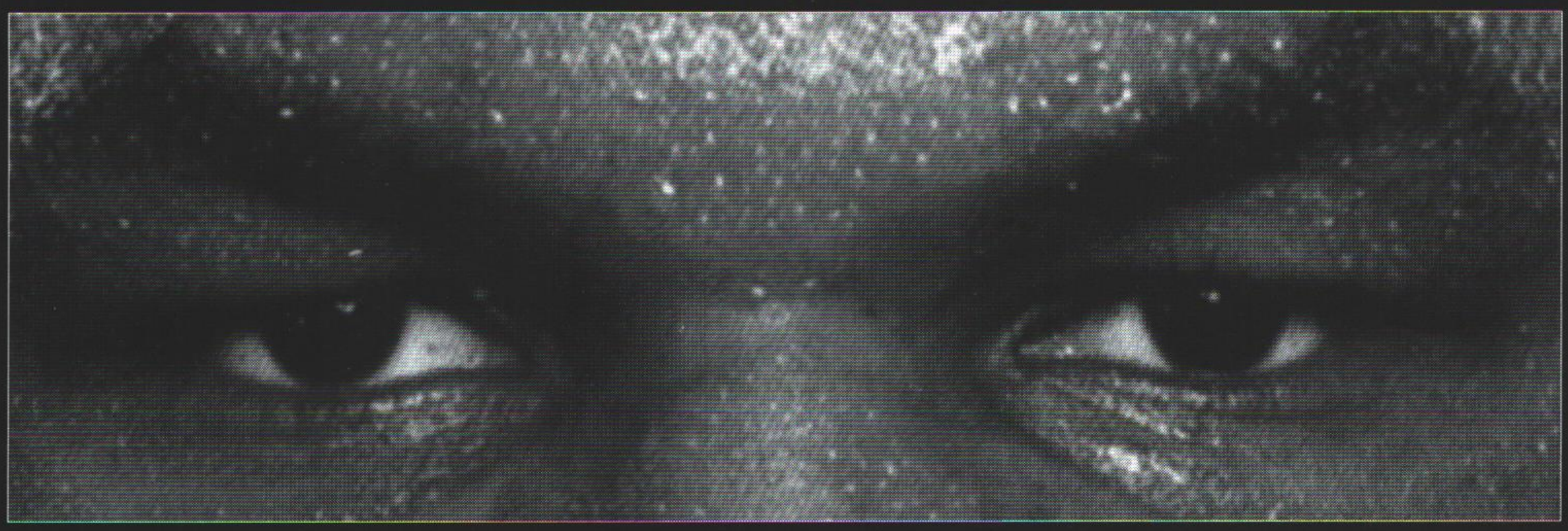
It is an infuriating sign of the times that leading feminists can call for women to identify with each other only on the basis of our collective degradation at the hands of men—and that such a collectivity of victims can be presented as having something to do with freedom. It is testament to the bankrupt state of feminist politics that the best it can come up with as a nineties version of the Women's Liberation Movement is a campaign to make all women appear and act as pathetic and helpless as possible.

***Ellie Lee***

Tony Coyle squares up to the anti-Tyson alliance

# Tyson

## A hate figure for our times



**Mike Tyson may** not be many women's idea of an ideal dinner date. But the anti-Tyson feminists are not doing the cause of equality any favours. They typify the insidious fashion for sentiments that would once have been stated in the bald language of race and class prejudice to be wrapped up in more subtle expressions of concern about women's safety and male violence.

Black heavyweight champions of the world—especially the stroppy ones—have always taken a lot of stick. The idea of a big black man being able to call himself the best on Earth, and to make a fortune in the process, has long rankled with racially minded people in the worlds of sport, the media and politics.

When Jack Johnson broke a colour bar to become the first black heavyweight champion in 1908, Jack London wrote an article in the *New York Herald* declaring that 'The White Man must be rescued'. That has pretty much been the message ever since.

They hated Johnson, who humiliated their champions while laughing and waving at the Ku Klux Klan fans in the crowd and then rubbing their noses in it by showing off his cash and his white women in all the best places. More than half a century later they hated Muhammed Ali, who became a Muslim, refused to fight in Vietnam and took a stand against injustice. And now they hate Mike Tyson, another Muslim convert with a Chairman Mao tattoo on his shoulder and an apparently un-American bad motherfucker attitude.

Not all black boxers get the same treatment, of course. Since the supply of Great White Hopes more or less dried up, the boxing establishment has had to adopt tame black fighters to do its dirty work for them. So they loved Joe Louis, and they cheered for the black Jersey Joe Wallcott against 'the nigger' Ali. You don't have to be a boxing expert to figure out who is the latest black heavyweight to be put in the 'he might be a coon, but he's our coon' category in Britain. Did anybody notice any black faces among 'Bruno's army' of supporters at the Tyson fight in Las Vegas in March? (That was one army which would have needed to bring in a tank regiment to secure victory.)

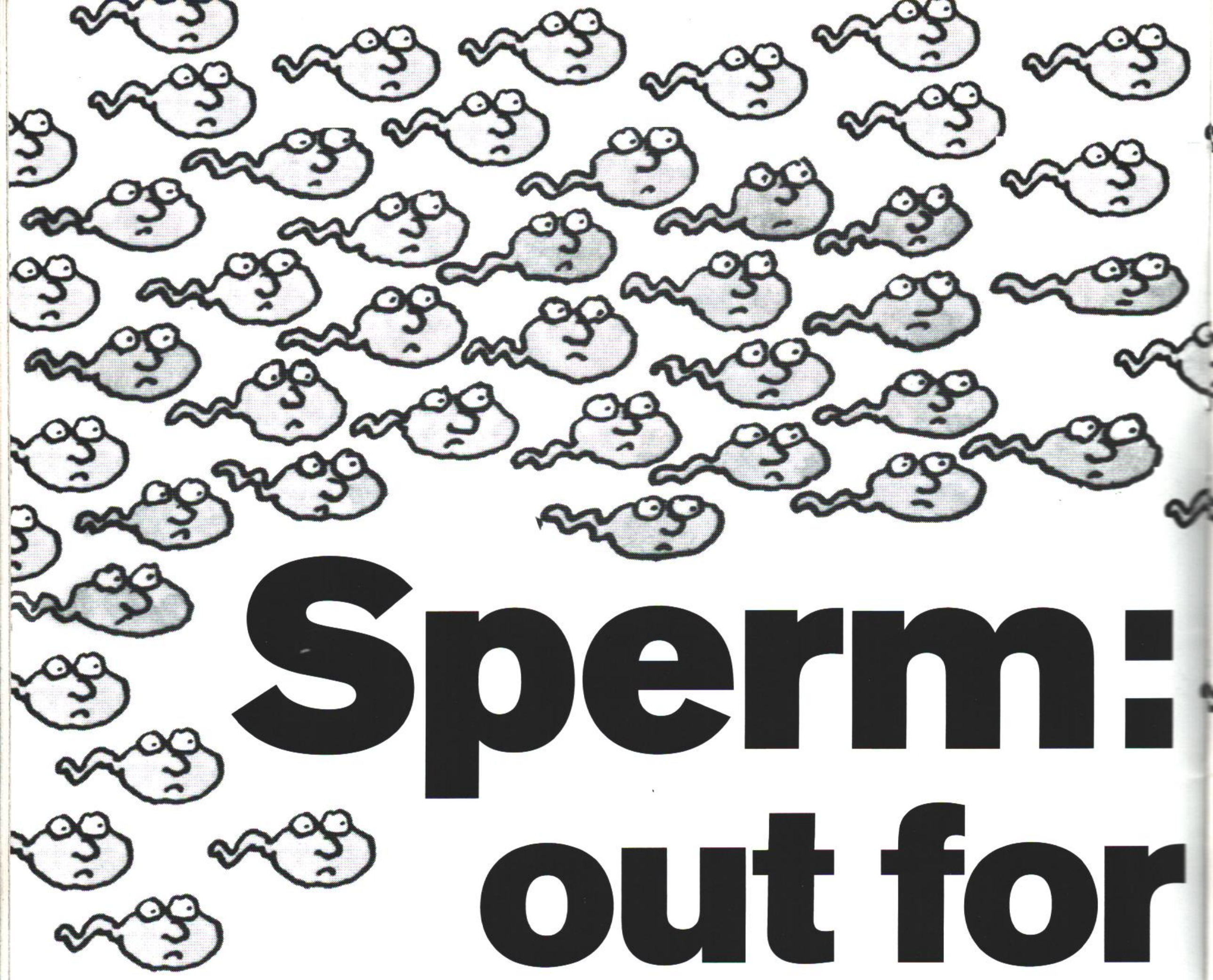
In one sense, the powerful anti-Tyson feeling today is just the latest example of the old-fashioned race hate that the best of his predecessors had to cope with. But there is something else going on here too. In addition to the attacks from the usual quarters, Tyson also comes under fire from new critics using the language of the feminist critique of masculinity.

**With a rape** conviction stamped on his record and an alleged history of assaulting women, Tyson symbolises all that is now supposed to be wrong with men at their worst: nasty, brutish and short on sensitivity. Those who despise boxing as an outdated bastion of working class machismo have found in the brooding, explosively violent Tyson the perfect focus for their prudish crusade to ban the spectacle of licensed male violence. And their intervention on a feminist anti-Tyson ticket has given a new lease of life and legitimacy to all of the old crap about the dangerous black male.

These days the overt language of race is considered unacceptable in American public life. But the new etiquette stops at ringside, especially in Tyson's case. Listen to the language that is used to describe Tyson in action—'animal', 'savage', 'monster'. Where else, outside of a murder trial, could the media get away with talking like that about a black celebrity and multi-millionaire? The beauty of it is that they can now put some pillars of feminist respectability—black as well as white—in the front row of their hate campaign. The counter-position of Frank Bruno, gentle and decent family man, only added to the stereotyping of Tyson as rapacious beast.

**All of which** makes Mike Tyson an appropriate hate figure for our times, a target against which the gnarled old reactionaries of race wars past and the self-righteous reactionaries of sex wars present can join forces.

In response to the unholy anti-Tyson alliance, many young blacks and other alienated groups on both sides of the Atlantic have made him their favourite anti-hero, idolising him as somebody who can hit back on their behalf, a muscular finger they can stick up the establishment's backside. Fair enough. But nobody should mirror the other crowd's attitude by pretending that Tyson stands for something he does not. He is no symbol of political resistance any more than he is a symbol of black male bestiality. He is just a top fighter, whose bouts of barely controlled aggression are a lot more exciting to watch than one of Frank Bruno's family pantos. ●



# Sperm: out for

## David Nolan examines the latest panic about men's health—the falling sperm count controversy

According to some experts, it seems that sperm counts are plummeting so precipitately that humanity could be on the way out sometime in the next century. The media has seized on the issue as further proof that men just do not measure up in the nineties.

A study published in the *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) earlier this year claims to provide evidence of a serious decline in the quality of human semen in the UK (S Irvine, E Cawood, D Richardson, E MacDonald and J Aitken, 'Evidence of deteriorating semen quality in the United Kingdom: birth cohort study in 577 men in Scotland over 11 years', *BMJ*, 24 February 1996). The study of Scottish men born between 1951 and 1973 identified a decline not just in sperm numbers, but also in sperm motility (their ability to swim), and an apparently large increase in the numbers of deformed and useless sperm.

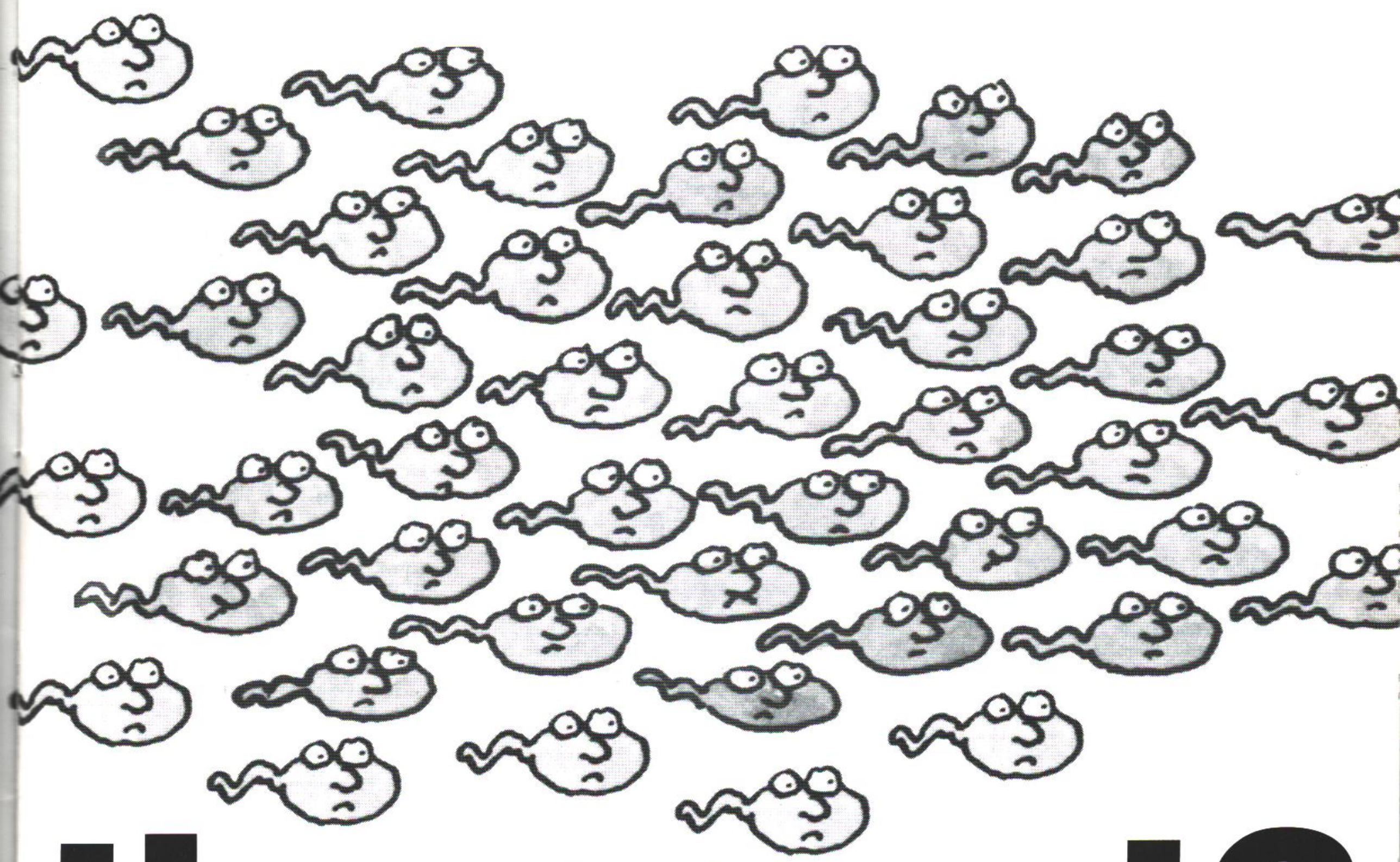
The study, carried out between 1984 and 1995 by the Centre for Reproductive Biology of the Medical Research Council in Edinburgh, found that men born in the 1970s have sperm counts some 24 per cent lower than those born in the 1950s. Those born before 1959 had about 98m sperm per millilitre, while those born after 1970 had 78m sperm per millilitre. Some have concluded that British men may not be able to sire children naturally if this decline continues.

The Scottish study was commissioned as a result of growing evidence of declining sperm counts the world over. A recent World Health Organisation (WHO) survey of 61 papers published between 1938 and 1991 concluded that men today had as few as half as many sperm as in the 1930s. What's more, many of those sperm which are around today are apparently malformed—all tail and no head, two tails or no tails—and so of little use in the reproductive process.

### Firing blanks

This is a scenario to strike fear into the hearts of men. Fertility is assumed to be key to the male psyche; nobody wants to be known as Jaffa—the seedless one. Yet the evidence of plummeting sperm counts is not as overwhelming as it first appears. And the doomsday implications which have been drawn reveal more about the morbid, insecure mood of our times—especially where 'manliness' is concerned—than they do about real trends in human reproduction.

There are serious problems and doubts surrounding the data on sperm counts. For instance, the 'decline' noted in the WHO survey, from which the



# the count?

panic stemmed, is entirely due to the fact that statisticians increased the lower limits of what are considered normal sperm counts. By moving the finishing line, they ensured that more men would fall short. The *New England Journal of Medicine* in particular has been highly critical of many studies into men's sperm counts, pointing out that the men who take part are often not representative of the whole population. The most recent study did not even bother to monitor how long the men had abstained from ejaculating before the tests—a factor which can seriously change the numbers of sperm in any given sample.

The fact is that every man's sperm count goes up and down like a yo-yo all the time. Dr Richard Sharpe, from the same unit at the Medical Research Council has pointed out that, over a period of several months, the numbers of sperm in any given sample taken under controlled conditions from the same man will range from seven million sperm per millilitre to 170m sperm per millilitre. The recent study only looked at one sample from each man—clearly problematic if they are trying to prove a trend.

Contrary to the impression often given by the popular media, there are serious disagreements among doctors and experts over the issue of falling sperm counts. A study due to be published in the May edition of *Fertility and Sterility* claims to have found a small increase in sperm counts among three groups of men tested over a period of 25 years. Dr Delores Lamb of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas recently organised a conference on fertility where he announced that scientists are sure that 'we are all pretty safe'. The majority of those attending the conference agreed that there was no conclusive evidence that semen quality had declined. As *New Scientist* puts it, 'most of the evidence accumulated so far is dogged by uncertainty'.

Amid all of the confusions and uncertainty, one indisputable fact is that as many as half of the pregnancies in the UK in any given year will be unplanned. This means that nearly half a million women a year in this country are becoming pregnant by accident, thanks to the sterling efforts of the modern sperm. That hardly looks like evidence of a potentially infertile species.

Even if there was incontrovertible proof of a fall in sperm counts, it does not follow at all that the future of humanity would be put at risk. Humans have always been among the least fertile species. Yet our population has been rising steadily (with the exception of the odd plague in the Dark Ages). Mankind has never had too many problems reproducing, even though we might seem to measure up badly to other mammals in sperm terms.

## Breeding like hamsters

Men produce about four million sperm per gramme of testis each day. Most animals produce six times that much. Most animals produce abnormalities in between two and five per cent of their sperm. In humans it is more like 30 to 70 per cent. Overall men produce the same numbers of sperm a day as a hamster. In some animals, between 15 and 100 per cent ▶

of sperm reach the site of fertilisation. In rabbits, famed for their fertility, it is 0.01 per cent. In men, only about 1 out of 7.5m sperm (or 0.0000133 per cent) make it all the way.

The fact that the sperm issue centres on male fertility makes it a particularly potent panic

About one in six couples in the UK have problems with fertility; a third because of the man, another third because of the woman, and the remainder due to problems with both partners. Even couples with no fertility problems can find getting pregnant difficult. The window of opportunity is only between one and five days a month. Some couples will take up to a year to get the woman pregnant. In animals, where there is little opportunity to have a second go, pregnancy occurs far more often; in some cases, it is pretty much guaranteed with every intercourse.

## Modern living

Yet despite all these difficulties, people continue to procreate. It only takes one sperm in the right place at the right time to achieve the desired result (or not, in the case of unwanted pregnancies). A bit like the Pony Express, it seems the sperm will always get through. One would imagine that, as men produce up to 800m sperm each time they ejaculate, a decline should not be too much of a problem.

If the supposed falling sperm count was affecting fertility, there surely ought to be a big increase in the numbers of people reporting fertility problems. Yet the number of infertile couples who want children has remained pretty much the same since the first fertility clinic opened in 1947.

Any category you care to look at suggests that the alleged decline in sperm count has not led to a decrease in the numbers of conceptions. Conceptions in England rose from 713 700 in 1982 to 825 700 in 1992, as did the rate of conceptions (from 72.3 per 1000 women aged 15-44 in 1982 to 79.4 per 1000 in 1992). The number of abortions rose from 122 400 in 1982 to 158 000 in 1992, suggesting that far from there being a shortage of pregnancies, there are more unplanned ones as well.

In any case, it is irrational to draw any direct links between the vitality of sperm and population trends. One vital factor in the reproduction of the human race is not just how many people are born, but how long we live. So while men's sperm counts may have been declining, the population has been increasing. Throughout the period under examination (1961-94) there has been an increase in actual numbers, despite a fall in the number of births (recently reversed) and the trend for more women to delay childbirth until later in life. Other social factors—such as the decline in the death rate, especially among the young—have far more of an impact on population than a marginal change in the numbers of sperm men carry around.

All in all, the evidence of a fall in sperm counts is questionable and its impact upon population far more so. So what is all the fuss about? The recent furore is clearly not really about a sperm crisis at all. It should be understood more as a symptom of the general mood of doom and gloom which permeates society today.

No two experts who claim that sperm counts are falling seem able to agree on the causes. But one thing which all of the speculative explanations have in common is the attempt to blame some aspect of modern living: driving a car for long periods, too much alcohol, no alcohol, too little sex, too much sex, tight trousers and underpants, babies' dummies, petrol fumes, X-rays, soya beans, exposure to oestrogens contained in the contraceptive pill, face creams, dental fillings, infant milk formulae, obesity, exercise, smoking, too few vitamins, stress, detergents, exposure to some chemicals (especially pesticides in the environment), tinned vegetables and even the plastic wrappings on food have been blamed.

None of these explanations for an alleged fall in sperm counts has any substantial evidence to support it. Even the favourite theory of the moment, the possible impact of oestrogens which have got into the water supply via the contraceptive pill, has been rubbished as having 'little or no scientific basis' by John A Thomas from the University of Texas Health Science Centre.

## Forget the facts

In place of hard evidence, all of the doom-laden theories about falling sperm counts are propped up by the folk wisdom of our age: the assumption that everything is getting worse these days, and that every advance of modern science and technology from the car to the pill must have adverse side effects on our lives. The mood of caution and of always expecting the worst was summed up by Professor Lewis Smith, director of the Institute for Environment and Health at Leicester University, who conceded that 'there is no convincing evidence of a general fall-off in fertility' yet concluded that 'we can't be complacent even if there is an overabundance in the level of sperm'. In other words, there probably isn't a serious problem, but let's all panic anyway.

The discussion about disappearing sperm and the future of humanity fits in with and feeds the apocalyptic mood shaping public discussion today. It is a pretty sure bet that any story about health risks, from the Ebola virus in Africa to the pill scare or BSE in Europe, will be full of over-inflated hyperbole that relates to the insecure state of society as a whole rather than the particular health issue involved.

## The way we were

Against this background, the fact that the sperm issue centres on male fertility makes it a particularly potent panic. The notion that men, the traditional exemplars of strength and vitality in society, are now on the slide brings the fear of the future into sharp focus.

A recent *Daily Telegraph* editorial on the sperm count controversy sums up the mood. It noted that 'there is a fragile quality about research, however diligent, which leads us to apocalyptic conclusions'. Yet it concluded in dark tones that 'the modern trend towards vast megalopolitan capitals...is far removed from even the Victorian era where most men...had enough sperm to sire a great many children'. From the editorial offices of the *Telegraph* it seems as if modern society, with its motor cars, detergents and oestrogens, has conspired (along with women no doubt) to reduce men's power and ability to act decisively. As the editorial concluded, 'it is virility, more than fertility, that is declining'.

The underlying theme of the sperm furore is that the changes brought about by modern living and its interference with nature are creating problems which threaten the future of humanity. This whole scare, like many others, is partly driven by a restorationist sentiment which pines for a return to a previous era when they imagine life was less cluttered and complicated. (The fact that people's lives were also a lot shorter and harder in the past is typically ignored.) This trend of continually harking back to the past reveals a growing sense of foreboding about the future. And it is this foreboding that gives such scope for health panics and exaggerated scares about the decline of life on the planet. The morbid preoccupation with health and the fate of humanity tells us much more about society's unhealthy state of mind today than it does about the future state of men's reproductive capacity. ●

# Grameen woman blues

The Grameen Bank has won worldwide support for its policy of 'empowering' impoverished women in rural Bangladesh. Para Teare from Genderwatch is less impressed

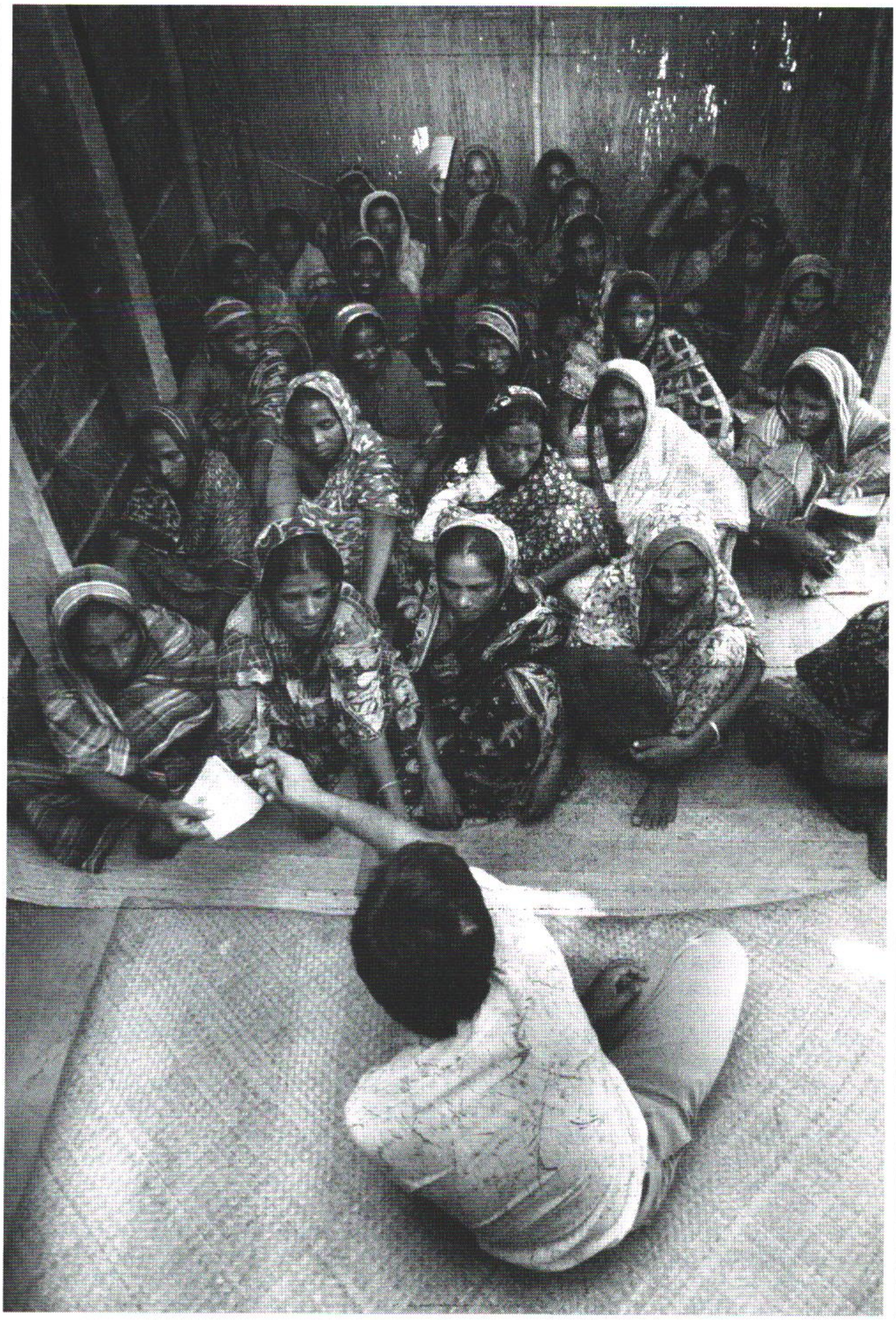


PHOTO: ZED NELSON/PANOS PICTURES

**In the midst** of all the Third World's problems, one success story seems to be talked up time and again. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is widely applauded for its policy of lending money for self-help projects to the landless poor, and especially to impoverished women. The Grameen's fans include development theorists, feminists, and financiers from the World Bank. At last year's Social Summit in Copenhagen, Hillary Clinton expressed her appreciation for the bank's role in the economic, social and political lives of girls and women in Bangladesh. Professor Mohammed Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, tours the world giving speeches and advice on the bank's role. The Grameen model is now being emulated elsewhere.

The Grameen Bank prides itself that the credit it offers to people, especially women, gives them power to invest in self-help activities, improve their health, get educated and even save for the future. Feminists have hailed the bank as 'empowering women' by improving their status in the community and in their ▶

◀homes. Yunus describes the bank as a people's movement, and everybody applauds its efforts to build from the grassroots rather than simply giving handouts from above.

Unlike any other financial institution, the Grameen Bank's stated aim is to eradicate poverty among the landless poor, chiefly women, in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world. Over 80 per cent of Bangladesh's 122m people live below the poverty line. Professor Yunus, a student in economics and development, wanted more for his country's poor. Arguing that national economic development brought no change for 50 per cent of the people at the bottom, who could not progress because they had no resources, Yunus pioneered a bank to target the poor.

The Grameen Bank lends out small amounts (US$60-70) to people in rural areas organised in groups of five or six. Loans are in the first instance only given to two members of the group; others are allowed to borrow when the two prove they can make regular payments. The mechanics of the loans and repayments are overseen by a chief who runs weekly meetings. Once the groups are set up, the borrowers become more than clients of the bank. They are made to feel responsible for the bank, and end up taking out shares in the bank. A familial atmosphere is encouraged between the bank's staff and clients, who call one another sister and brother. It all seems a far remove from the old hard-faced image of 'male-dominated' banking.

So are the commentators right to use the Grameen Bank as a model of empowerment? It may be that giving credit to the women has given them a (very) little spending power. Yet the new situation that they find themselves in is surely not one of liberty, but of dependence on the bank.

**If a woman** borrows 4000 taka, she has to make a weekly payment of 80 taka for the next 50 weeks. In the last two weeks of the year, she has to pay interest on the loan—about 407 taka—if she wants to secure another loan or ensure that other members of her group are able to borrow. She also has to give the bank a small amount for its emergency fund. Whatever is done with the credit, be it paddy husking or buying a rickshaw, the demand to repay the debt gives the Grameen Bank a claim over the women's lives and labour. The relationship is not free from exploitation. The bank borrows funds at 12 per cent from its zonal offices, and charges 20 per cent interest on loans it makes to the women. That gives a margin of eight per cent—the kind of numbers which a banker in the City of London would be happy to settle for.

Feminists may have a rosy view of this approach, but the women who borrow seem very clear about their dependence on the bank. When these women were asked if they wanted their children to become Grameen Bank members, they all answered with a resounding *no*. 'We do not want our children to be always in debt as we are', was the response. 'Grameen Bank is for the poor. We want our children to be rich.' (See A Fuglesang and D Chandler, *Participation as a Process, Process as Growth: What We Can Learn from the Grameen Bank*, 1993.)

**The crux of the matter is that the women are not autonomous—they are bonded to the bank by their debt**

The crux of the matter is that the women are not autonomous—they are bonded to the bank by their debt. This kind of modern debt bondage dressed up as 'empowerment' is a far cry from being in control of their lives.

Put that point to supporters of the Grameen Bank, however, and many will say that the important thing is that access to credit gives the woman equal power to her husband. Borrowing money allows the women to do work like paddy husking in their own right, so forcing the men to take them more seriously and show them some respect. Research has shown Grameen women reporting that their husbands show them more affection than before, and that they have more of a say in household decisions. The bank will only give house-building loans if the land is registered in the woman's name. This, it is argued, gives women a stake in the community and ensures that men who divorce their wives will not have automatic rights to all the property. Surely, say the Grameen's supporters, all this can only improve women's position?

PHOTOS: GRAMEEN BANK

These are interesting arguments. But a closer look suggests that neither the motives behind the bank's feminised approach to lending, nor the results of its policies, are quite as wholesome as they might appear.

Behind all the talk of empowering women, a major reason for the Grameen Bank's success is that its strategy makes hard-headed business sense for the financiers. The bank claims that an impressive 98 per cent of all the money it lends out gets repaid. One of the main reasons for this is that it lends money to women, who have proved more reliable than men in repaying loans. A Bangladesh Rural Development Board survey of people involved in cooperatives found that women repaid all debts at a rate of 87 per cent, compared to men's 40 per cent.

In impoverished rural communities, women cannot run away if they are unable to repay the money. They are easier to locate and to intimidate because they will be at home with their children. They are also available for daytime meetings, for monitoring loan-use and repayment. Men, on the other hand, can up and leave the village. Worse still, they can be violent if pressurised to repay the loan. In one interview Professor Yunus argued that the rich can always abscond with loans; the clear implication of his remarks was that the poor, on the other hand, will always be there to repay (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 5 March 1991). Given that women are the poorest of the poor, it makes sense to lend them money. You can be sure that they will stay put.

**Men are frowned** upon if they attend the centre meetings on their wives' behalf and repay the Grameen loan. The official attitude is that this deprives women of the benefits of regular social contact and group attendance. But you have to wonder how much this is really a fear of the men taking control of the loan and making it more difficult for the bank to retrieve the debt. Many Grameen and government field workers are suspicious of poor men. They view them as 'petty criminals' and 'touts' who are likely to squander loans on prostitution, gambling, cinemas and restaurants in town. (See Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta, 'Who takes the credit?', *World Development*, Vol24 No1, 1996.) In other words, men are a real risk.

Lending money to women is now seen as the only safe kind of rural development scheme. BRAC—Bangladesh's largest non-governmental organisation—has phased out men's village organisations in favour of women's since 1993. Even if the men take control of the credit, the imperative is on the women to make sure repayments are made. Anne Marie Goetz reports a government field worker boasting that 'we are much better at getting our loan money back now that we are using women as middlemen' (*World Development*, Vol24 No1, 1996). Women are treated as the more responsible and malleable individuals in the village.

Far from being an 'empowering' experience, this situation only points to the degraded status of women in Bangladeshi society. The reason why impoverished women are selected to be the beneficiaries of bank credit is because they are seen as conservative, passive, submissive, and gently persuasive, reinforcing all the traditional notions of oppressed rural womanhood. They are

the ones who will stay home doing the cooking, cleaning and caring, worrying about the health and education of their children. These circumstances are now being celebrated as virtues of rural womanhood through the Grameen Bank.

On top of their arduous domestic responsibilities, women are also expected to carry out some subsistence work, aided by a few dollars from the bank, and to welcome it as autonomy and empowerment. In reality, their life is as hard, and opportunities as limited, as ever. Grameen loans do not open up brave new worlds for the women of Bangladesh. Instead they invest the money in traditional small-scale tasks like paddy husking, petty trade and livestock rearing. The fact that women are still trapped in such home-centred drudgery suggests that Grameen Bank loans act more as an affirmation of the status quo than a breakthrough for female emancipation.

**The Grameen Bank** approach makes a virtue of the inferior position of women. And the men fare no better. Any sign of aggressiveness or a willingness to give two fingers to the system is now stamped on. The notion of empowering women is being used to degrade men.

Far from being a people's movement, the Grameen Bank's policies can only help to fragment and deepen the divisions between men and women in a place like Bangladesh. The bank's approach has helped to redefine the issue of inequality. No longer is it seen primarily as an international question of an unequal power relationship between the dominant West and the dominated Third World. Instead, the bank's focus is on redistributing wealth and power between men and women within the impoverished households of rural Bangladesh. The result is to mystify the wider causes of the problems which these communities face, and reduce the idea of economic development to a localised attempt to share out the misery between men and women.

Bangladesh is a very poor country, and it is getting relatively poorer. The World Bank reports that between 1960 and the mid-1980s the number of households in Bangladesh that could not support a family increased by 143 per cent. At the same time, the rural labour force has grown in an agricultural market which is incapable of absorbing the surplus. More men have found that there are fewer jobs and there is less money to go around.

**Against this background** of poverty and fierce competition for jobs, the intervention of banks and NGOs which prioritise giving resources to one section of the population—women—can only exacerbate tensions. Goetz cites an example which illustrates how acute such conflicts can be in a society with scarce opportunities. The women's NGO Shaptagram encouraged Bangladeshi women to buy their own power tillers. The women rented these machines and their labour for preparing crop land for ploughing. By the end of the second year, landlords and farmers angry that this was depriving men of a traditional source of income (from traction ploughing) got together and bought their own power tillers, and pushed the women out of business. (See *World Development*, Vol24 No1, 1996.)

Redistributing income from men to women, sharing out the misery of a shrinking cake, is not going to solve the people's problems.

While the Grameen Bank claims to empower women against men in Bangladesh, its policies actually help to reinforce the power of outside agencies to control the lives of all the rural poor. Hillary Clinton praised the bank's wish to participate in the women's social development. In 1984 the bank and the Grameen women agreed 16 resolutions on 'improved social practices'. In effect, this means trying to impose a different culture on the women. Not only can they be in debt to the bank for the rest of their lives, but they also have to conform to rules laid down from above: only drinking tube well or boiled water, growing vegetables all year round and, most importantly, committing themselves to having small families. The social development project is funded by Unicef and other Western donors.

**Since when has women's autonomy meant being told how to live and how many children to have?**

Since when has women's autonomy meant being told how to live and how many children to have? Empowerment turns out to mean Grameen women selling their souls to the bank. Given that the bank does not accept the concept of dowry, it would be interesting to know what happens when a Grameen woman's daughter wants to

marry a non-Grameen man whose family wants a dowry, in line with ancient custom. Presumably the poor girl will have to forsake her love, because her mother is duty bound by the bank not to recognise the dowry system. So much for choice.

The Grameen Bank has two million clients and is an internationally acknowledged success. But its emphasis on giving women their share of poverty, and its attempts to make a virtue out of the symptoms of inferiority, fits in with a world that has given up on the goal of economic development as we have known it in the past.

For Professor Yunus, development today is not about building dams, highways or even providing villagers with electricity. For him development comes alive when one poor woman can afford a second set of clothing. 'Not a bird's eye view, but a worm's view', as he puts it.

Grameen Bank spokesmen insist that the poor are the best instruments of their own salvation. In other words, the problems which Bangladesh's people face are not to do with the unequal relationship between the Third World and the West. Their poverty has nothing to do with the simple fact that their country's resources have to be used to repay the interest on foreign debts totalling almost $1.5 billion. No, the poor can rest assured that they are responsible for their own poverty. And one way out of this situation is to become more 'self-reliant'—that is, even more indebted to the Grameen Bank.

Allied to this is the common view that poverty is simply a state of mind, a form of culture which the bank hopes to change through its social engineering. The Grameen Bank's weekly meetings, its military salute, its four slogans: 'Discipline', 'Unity', 'Courage' and 'Hard work', are all supposed to help the poor to change their mentality. The words of two academics sum up the problem as the Grameen Bank and its supporters see it:

'The culture of poverty is in the stance of the landless. It is expressed in the bent back, the fallen glance and the low inaudible voice. It is an emotional vote of no confidence in the self....Grameen recognises that people's dignity grows out of a straight back. The bank workers attach great importance to people in centre meetings, look at them directly as they talk, standing straight and speaking loudly and clearly.' (*Participation as a Process*, p86)

No wonder the World Bank and Hillary Clinton applaud the Grameen project. When a century of intervention by Western financiers, governments and agencies has singularly failed to bring economic development to large parts of the Third World, along comes a pioneering feminised bank in Bangladesh to give them the perfect alibi for the market's inability to deliver; the poor, and especially impoverished men, get the blame again. The key to the Grameen Bank's popularity in powerful capitals around the globe is that it is a Southern 'success' story which helps to excuse the failures of the North. ●

# THE MAD COW

The roots of the scare about beef lie not in the science of prion diseases, but in the pathology of modern society, says Dr Michael Fitzpatrick

What precipitated the great mad cow panic of March 1996, causing a collapse in demand for British beef, a worldwide ban on beef exports and a devastating blow to the beef industry? After all, it is 10 years since bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or 'mad cow disease') was first recognised in British cattle and at least eight years since the spectre of this condition being transmitted to humans, in the form of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), was first raised.

In the February issue of *Living Marxism,* in an article on the previous upsurge of concern about mad cow disease at the end of last year, I wrote that 'the novel feature of the BSE/CJD scare' was that it was 'a panic about a disease which does not actually exist'. I emphasised that there had *'not been a single case* in which its transmission from cattle infected with BSE to a human' had been demonstrated. So was the March scare triggered by the announcement that some medical or scientific authority had discovered such a link? Well...no, there was no new evidence.

The great mad cow panic did not begin in rural England or even in the media: it was launched by parliamentary statements by the ministers of health and agriculture on 20 March, which for the first time endorsed the possibility of a link between BSE, beef and CJD. Though ministers later accused the public of 'hysteria', the handling of this issue by the government and its scientific advisers revealed that they were at least as much in the grip of the irrationality of the mad cow panic as the population at large.

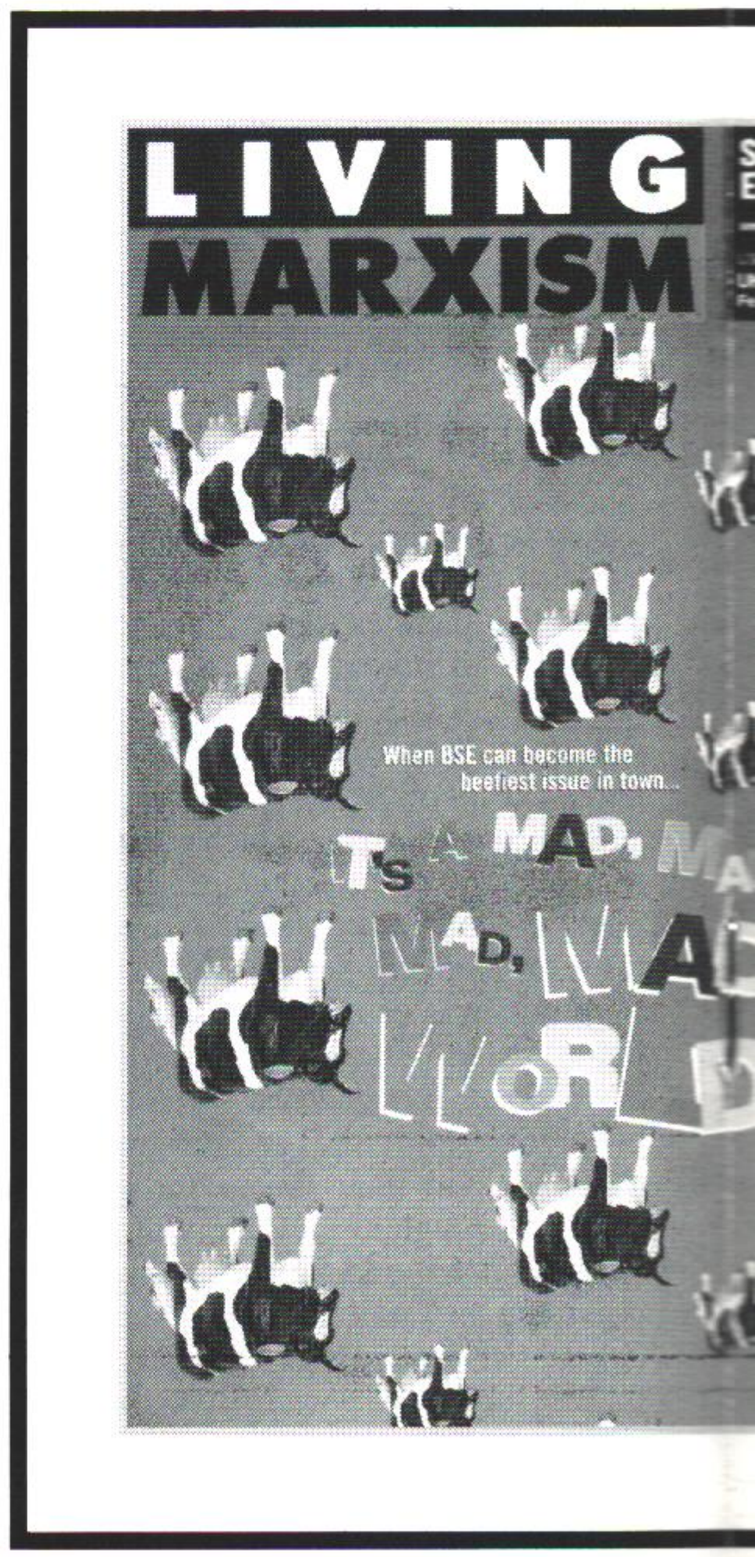
## Most likely

There has been much discussion of the 10 cases of a distinctive variant of CJD which prompted the government's Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (Seac) to advise a shift in the official line. In fact, the cases had been reported over the past two years and several had already received considerable national publicity. What was new was the expert scientific interpretation of the significance of these cases—in which CJD presented in a much younger age group than usual, with distinctive clinical and pathological manifestations.

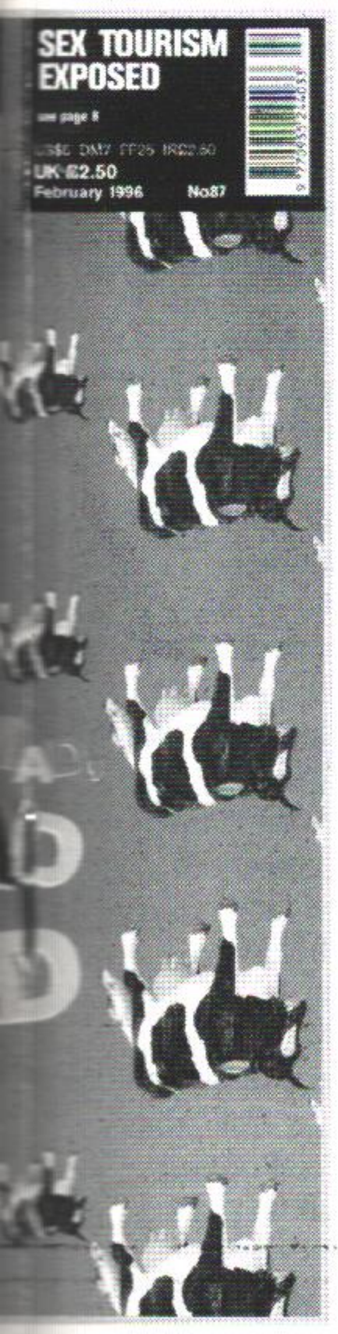
Whereas in the past Seac had emphasised that there was 'no evidence' to link BSE to CJD, it now concluded that 'the most likely explanation' for the 10 cases was exposure to BSE. This formulation was echoed by health minister Stephen Dorrell in his statement to the House of Commons and by chief medical officer Kenneth Calman in a message immediately transmitted by fax to every doctor in the country.

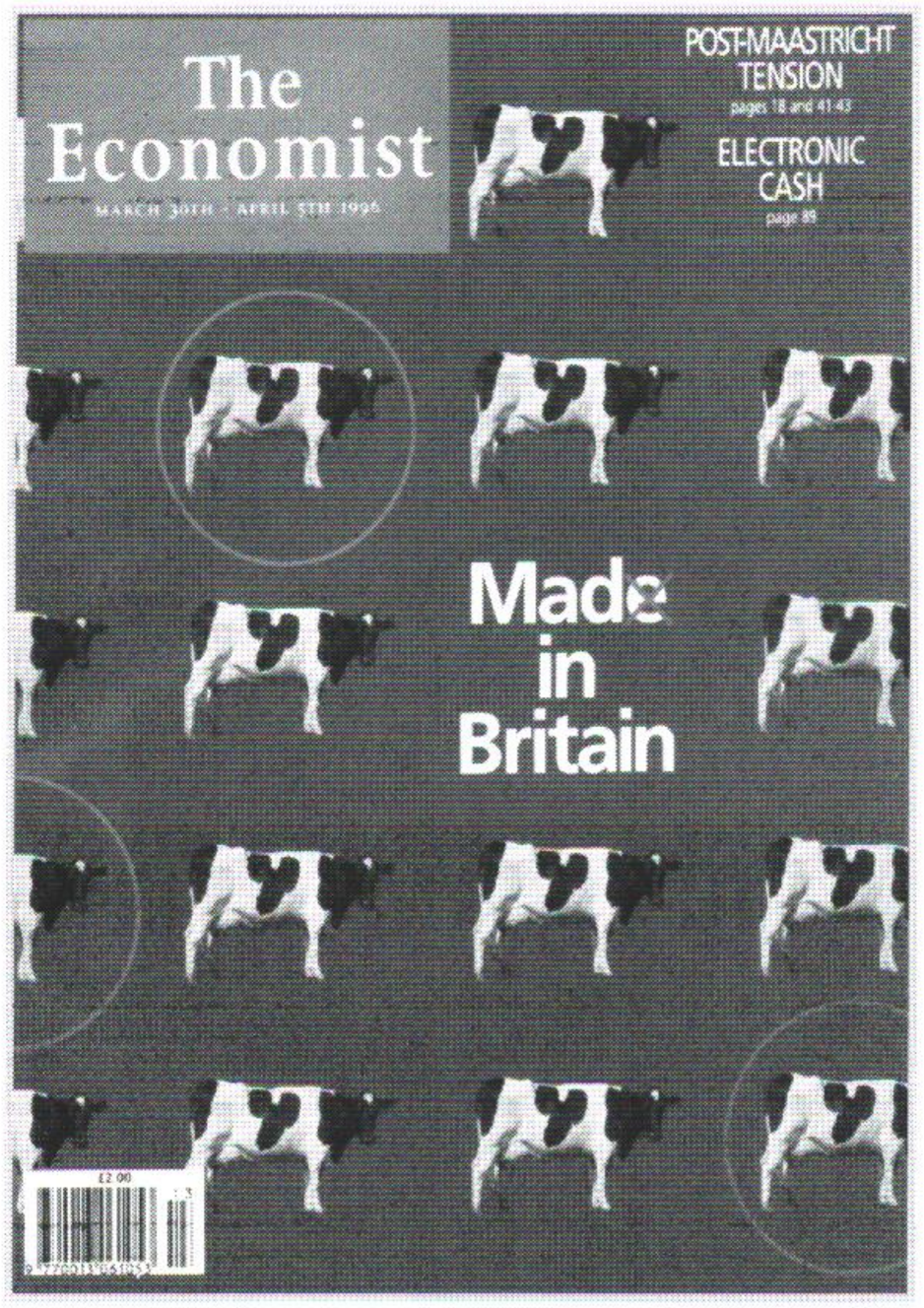
The hypothesis that BSE causes CJD is plausible—both are spongiform encephalopathies thought to be transmitted by 'prions'—but unproven. The strongest evidence is purely circumstantial: a supposedly distinctive variant of CJD (the details have yet to be published and independently validated) has emerged some eight to 10 years after the epidemic of BSE in cattle and the possibility of exposure of humans to infected beef products. Yet even this link in time raises doubts. The 'latent period' of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in humans is usually much longer—up to 30 years. If the relatively short latent period in recent cases is explained by a relatively high load of infectious particles, then a much higher number of cases would be expected. In fact the overall incidence of CJD *fell* from 55 cases in 1994 to 29 cases in 1995.

Though much has been made of a higher than expected incidence of CJD among agricultural workers in recent years, none of the 10 'new variant' cases falls into this occupational category. Edinburgh neurologist Robert Will, who heads the national CJD surveillance unit and is a prominent member of Seac, has observed an even higher incidence of CJD among ministers of religion than among farm workers (*Guardian,* 21 March 1996).



# The great mad cow panic



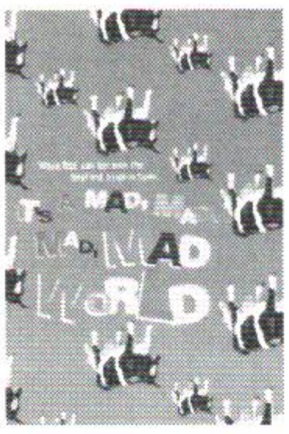

**Ever wish you were better informed? *Living Marxism*, February (left), the *Economist*, 30 March (right)**

The most telling evidence against the link comes from the laboratory of Professor John Collinge of St Mary's Hospital London, where experiments so far suggest that the agent responsible for BSE cannot cross the 'species barrier' into humans (see *Nature*, 21/28 December 1995).

## Sought and found

A number of alternative explanations of the supposed new variant of CJD have been put forward. The most persuasive is that more cases of CJD are being diagnosed as a result of greater awareness among medical professionals, and because of the establishment of a national surveillance unit in 1990; It has long been recognised that many cases of CJD go unrecognised (see Collinge *et al*, 'Prion dementia without characteristic pathology', *Lancet*, 7 July 1990; 'Doubts linger over human cases', *New Scientist*, 30 March 1996). As pathologist John Pattison, chair of Seac, has observed, 'it is still possible that we have found this because we looked for it more intensively than anyone else'.

Other experts have speculated that pigs and poultry could be harbouring BSE and passing it on to humans (see *New Scientist*, 6 April 1996). Another theory is that the new cases of CJD may represent ▶



some peculiar genetic susceptibility: it is well known that, in 10-15 per cent of cases the condition is the result of an inherited genetic defect.

In short, the notion that BSE causes CJD is a hypothesis supported only by fairly weak circumstantial evidence. It could be said to be the 'most likely' explanation of recent events only in the absence of any real explanation at all: understanding of the so-called 'prion diseases' remains primitive. In these circumstances, the statement that there is 'no evidence' of a link between BSE and CJD remains far more accurate than the revised Seac/government line, which misleadingly implies a much stronger link than is supported by the known facts.

**Saying that food is a source of death is like saying that life is a source of death**

Why then did the scientists and the government shift to take up a position on BSE/CJD that lacked empirical justification and had such catastrophic consequences? The answer to this question cannot be found in the science of the prion diseases, but in the pathology of modern society. The appeal of the BSE/CJD thesis is not based on science, but on the growing influence—on the public, politicians and scientists alike—of a number of irrational themes that have guaranteed a popular resonance for the mad cow panic.

## 'Meat is murder'

The first can be summed up in the notion that 'meat is murder'. In recent years there has been a steady growth in the influence of a set of broadly green, pro-animal, anti-science and technology ideas. These are expressed in the rise of vegetarianism, in an increasingly widespread distaste for intensive farming techniques and in popular campaigns against the transport of live animals and against McDonalds. For people who hold such sentiments, the thesis that BSE causes CJD has an instant attraction: it confirms their view that the production and consumption of meat are evil, and provides them with the additional argument that meat is also dangerous.

While in the past support for vegetarianism and animal rights were the province of religious zealots, eccentrics, and film and pop stars, these causes today command growing popular—and establishment—support. Academic philosophers and scientists can readily be found to contradict the rational and humanist foundations of modern civilisation. Many MPs of all parties, particularly the opposition parties, readily endorse prejudices against modern agriculture which romanticise the past and disparage the improvements in productivity—and public health—resulting from the application of technology. The medical and scientific world is increasingly influenced by these ideas. For example, the *British Medical Journal* recently published a polemic, written by an animal rights activist, against the Meat and Livestock Commission's advertising campaign 'Meat matters'.

One of the leading proponents of the BSE/CJD link is Professor Richard Lacey, a medical microbiologist whose works are published by the Vegetarian Society. For him, the link is a matter of faith which does not require substantiation by epidemiological or other scientific evidence.

## 'Safety first'

A second theme that has contributed to creating a climate of opinion conducive to the mad cow panic is that of 'safety first'. In our increasingly insecure society, in which familiar social and political landmarks have disappeared, there is a striking tendency to exaggerate the risks of everyday life and to live with a heightened sense of danger, if not one of impending doom. Pressure groups emphasise particular dangers—of nuclear radiation, global warming, atmospheric pollution or of male violence, crime, or diverse forms of abuse. Health hazards resulting from the environment or from individual lifestyle factors are a constant theme of public discussion.

Diet provides the link between concerns about environmental threats to health and individual choice. In a letter to the *Guardian,* in response to the mad cow crisis, Professor Tim Lang of the Centre for Food Policy at Thames Valley University emphasised that BSE was part of a 'wider crisis of food policy': 'Food is a key factor in our main sources of premature death—coronary disease and some cancers (bowel, breast).' (25 March 1996) This sort of statement, which generally passes without comment, is both untrue and absurd. In fact, diet plays a relatively small role in heart disease and bowel cancer and, arguably, none at all in breast cancer. Saying that food is a source of death is like saying that breathing is a source of death or that life is a source of death. Such statements reveal the morbid preoccupations that predispose our society to a panic about food.

The notion that we live today in a 'risk society' is increasingly influential. One of the guidelines that has emerged to regulate the 'risk society' is the 'precautionary principle'. This means that unless something can be proved to be safe, don't do it. The logic of this applied to the BSE/CJD controversy is clear: until it can be proved that BSE does not cause CJD, then avoid beef and beef products. As it will take decades to demonstrate this, the precautionary principle dictates lifelong vegetarianism—and close attention to food packages to detect hidden beef products. This may not seem any great sacrifice, but applied systematically to everyday life, the precautionary principle means a life of caution, restraint and, ultimately, resignation.

## 'Trust no-one'

Another theme that underlies the mad cow panic is that 'you can't trust anybody'. The most conspicuous manifestation of this lack of trust is the almost universal cynicism about the government, and politicians in general. A distrust for scientific and medical experts follows close behind. Opinion polls confirm how widespread is the conviction that the government and its scientific experts have concealed information about the dangers of BSE to humans. There is much resonance for the view that the government, because of party political and financial concerns, has colluded with the beef industry and the farmers against the interests of consumers.

Popular scepticism about politicians and scientists contains several ironies. People who express utter cynicism about government ministers and Seac are ready to put their faith in opposition politicians and critics of Seac such as Richard Lacey, who is a senior medical consultant and former government adviser. Another striking feature of the distrust of official statements is that people almost invariably believe that the danger is even greater than has been admitted; they never seem to accuse the government of exaggerating risks. The general rule of thumb appears to be that the more you distrust the government, the more you believe the panic; so the Tory-hating *Socialist Worker* pushed its way to the front of the sacremongering stampede with its 'Ban beef now' front page. Yet, from AIDS to BSE/CJD, the official record is one of consistently hyping up risks.

The corrosive consequences of the culture of distrust pervade modern society. They are most conspicuous, not in the public hysteria of the mad cow panic (which seemed to evaporate

at the first glimpse of cut price beef), but in the loss of confidence apparent among ministers and scientists in their handling of the affair.

For example, in an editorial in the *British Medical Journal*, Paul Brown, an American authority, recalled his judgement in a *BMJ* symposium on BSE/CJD last November that the available evidence suggested a 'negligible risk to humans', only to confess that 'it now appears that I was wrong' (30 March 1996). However he adduces no new evidence to justify this *volte face,* but simply repeats the now familiar refrain that 'no better explanation is presently forthcoming'. Being unable to advance a better explanation than that offered by a hypothesis for which there is only the weakest circumstantial evidence is a dubious basis for endorsing that hypothesis. Yet, within a few sentences, Brown is raising the spectre of a 'potential medical catastrophe'. The fact that an eminent scientist can swing in four months from characterising BSE as a 'negligible risk' to warning of potential catastrophe on the basis of no new evidence at all indicates a disturbing instability and lack of conviction.

## Whose confidence problem?

The politicians also seemed to lose their bottle. When John Selwyn Gummer responded to an earlier outbreak of mad cow panic by stuffing a hamburger into his daughter's mouth, at least the public knew he believed what he was saying. In March, when Stephen Dorrell and Douglas Hogg pointedly refused to confirm that they would feed beef to their own children, they revealed their lack of confidence in themselves as well as in British beef.

The lack of confidence of the scientists and the politicians fuelled the distrust of the public and resulted in the collapse of the beef industry. The mad cow panic rapidly provided the focus for a wider settling of scores. Britain's partners in the European Union seized the opportunity to strike back at Whitehall over its long record of foot-dragging towards integration, though their attempts to boost their domestic beef industry also hit difficulties as the mad cow panic spread through Europe. At home, the opposition parties sought to turn the government's discomfiture to electoral advantage.

Radical critics who take comfort from the government's difficulties might reflect on the wider consequences of the mad cow panic in reinforcing backward-looking, fatalistic and conservative themes in society. That seems a high price to pay for cheap beef. ●

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

FUTURES

# Who's afraid of nature's revenge?

John Gillott challenges the irrational doom-mongering which seems to pass for critical analysis of everything from farming methods to nuclear power today

**Is nature now** getting its own back on us for tampering with the natural order of things? Many prominent thinkers seem to think so, and they have used the suggestion that eating beef infected with BSE might cause an epidemic of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) in humans to support this notion. Typically, eminent microbiologist Richard Lacey has argued that the problem of BSE resulted from unnatural methods in farming: 'forcing naturally vegetarian animals to become carnivores, eating the remains of other animals...is probably what has caused the spread of BSE.' (*How Now Mad Cow?*) The message is that we are paying the price for our greed and our disregard of nature's rules; that we are facing the 'revenge of nature', a pay-back for the way in which human science and technology have manipulated other life-forms and altered the environment.

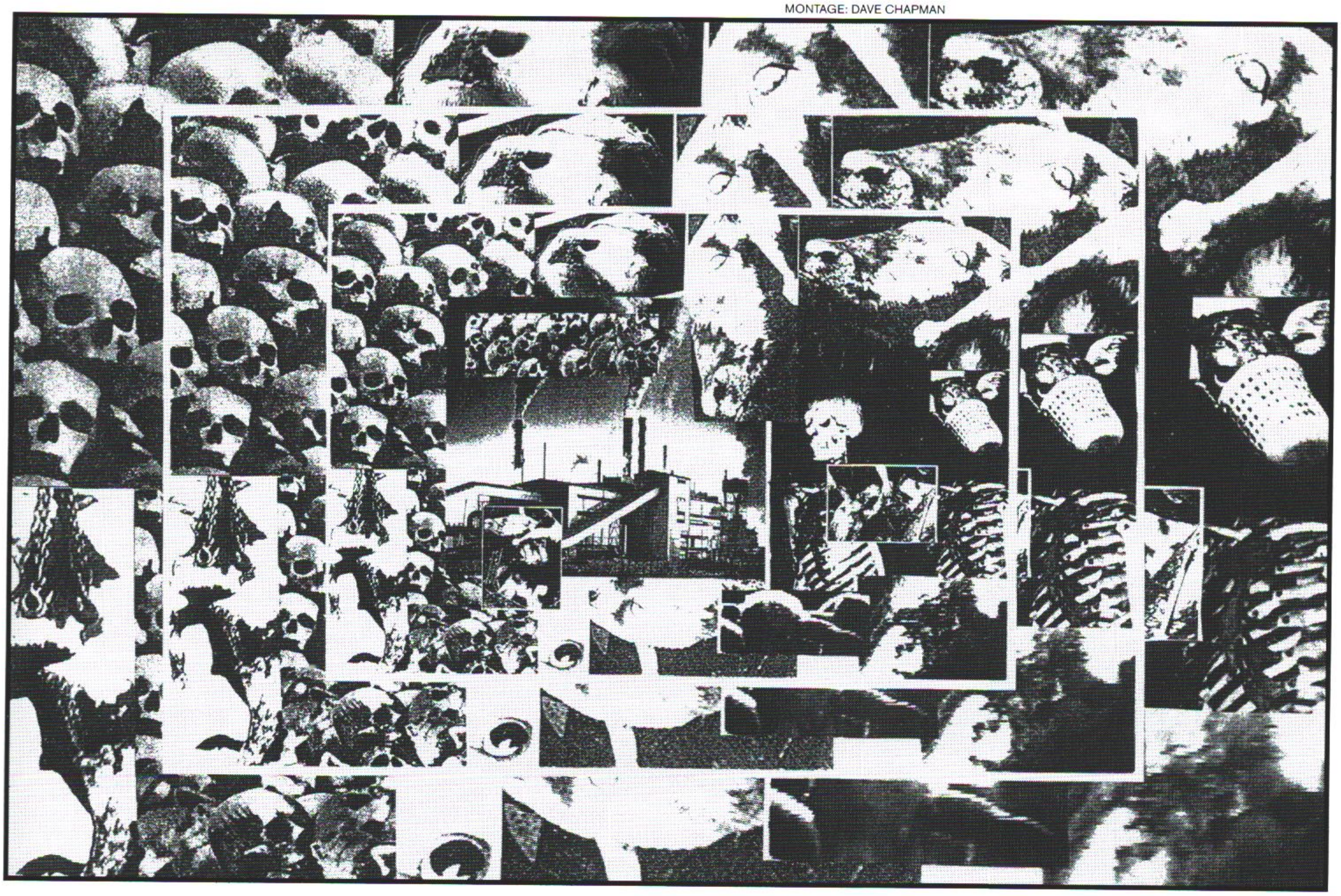
In the midst of the latest mad cows panic, Oxford philosopher John Gray captured the mood well in a piece for the *Guardian* which attempted to draw parallels between BSE and the tenth anniversary of the accident at Chernobyl. As a result of the 'culture of technological mastery of nature', we face, said Gray, 'incalculable but catastrophic' risks. All in all, he asked, 'is it altogether fanciful to see the threat of a major outbreak of CJD as a symptom of nature's rebellion against human hubris?' ('Nature bites back', *Guardian,* 26 March 1996).

For Gray, the threat of a 'revenge of nature' rises with the level of technology used. The further we get from natural processes, the more danger he believes we are in. So modern farming methods carry greater risks than traditional ones because they are unnatural; nuclear power is especially dangerous; and genetic engineering 'must be viewed with suspicion' because we are unaware of the longer term consequences of meddling. If we are to learn the lessons of Chernobyl and BSE, Gray says, then 'we should be ready to err on the side of caution'.

Ten years after Chernobyl, the 'revenge of nature' thesis is a seductive one. The watchword 'caution' keys into the prevailing mood of the times. It connects well with contemporary concerns about environmental pollution. It taps into an already powerful fear of the unknown. And it plays on a growing suspicion of commercial organisations involved in areas like genetics, the nuclear industry and food production.

**However, the appeal** of the 'revenge of nature' argument is based on emotive reactions rather than hard evidence. There is no basis in fact to the claim that 'unnatural' practices equal greater risk. Far from it: the

MONTAGE: DAVE CHAPMAN



development of science and technology through systematic interference with nature has not only equipped us to overcome many of the old problems which dogged humanity in the past, but has also given us the potential to cope with new problems like BSE as they arise.

Take the example of modern farming methods, which have come under so much fire of late. The attempt to draw a divide between natural and unnatural farming methods will not stand up to scrutiny. There is no such thing as a 'natural' farming method. Farming is a human practice with no equivalent in nature. The development of agriculture 10 000 years ago was one of the first great triumphs of humanity over nature, a key step on the road to the creation of civilised society. Every advance in farming since then has been achieved by overcoming natural barriers.

Leading American environmental campaigner Jeremy Rifkin claims that problems like BSE have arisen because we have 'denatured' cattle. This is a bizarre argument. Cattle are unnatural creations of human ingenuity in the first place—the result of deliberate breeding of animals to meet human needs. There has never been anything natural about the farming of animals. To get dairy cows to produce milk for people, calves are taken away from them straight after birth. All cattle, whether they be used to produce milk or meat, are fed more food than they would consume if they were just left alone in the fields. Organic farmers use clover and hay, perhaps supplemented with soya, silage and grain, while modern farming methods use animal proteins to boost the protein intake. But all are equally unnatural methods and the goal is the same: the production of extra milk and protein for human consumption.

**The particular focus** of recent controversy is the feeding of animal proteins to cattle, the process Richard Lacey says caused BSE. Farmers have, it is said, forced vegetarian animals to become carnivores. But so what? Cattle might be vegetarians in their normal eating habits, but like most mammals they are omnivores: they are after all capable of digesting animal protein, as practice has shown. Cows, like most mammals, eat their own (very ample) placentas after giving birth—so animal protein is not totally alien to them. Cattle may not digest animal protein as well as vegetable matter, and a diet rich in animal proteins can cause them harm. But there is considerable truth in the argument that protein is just protein at the end of the day. The body breaks it down into its constituent amino acids—the question of where those acids came from is ultimately of little importance.

Arguments about the dangers in modern farming methods compared to older ones make little sense. Traditional husbandry methods led to frequent outbreaks of disease, which could be spread simply by drawing cattle together. And, contrary to the impression given by recent shock and hype, feeding animal protein to cattle was a common practice well before modern intensive farming. While it has been widespread since 1945 and has taken many different forms, including the feeding of fertilizer made of crushed cattle and blood, it is only an extension of traditional miserly, 'waste-not-want-not' feeding practices. A National Farmers Union official was quoted as saying that animal protein has been fed to cattle 'since time immemorial'.

Not only are modern methods no more likely to cause disease than older ones, but the advance of agricultural science has actually enhanced our ability to overcome such problems. Richard Lacey's claim that feeding animal protein to cattle caused BSE is plain wrong. It was the feeding of *diseased* animal protein which caused BSE, not animal protein as such. His argument makes as much sense as claiming that contact with other people gives people diseases, rather than contact with people with diseases. ▶

There is always a possibility that disease can be transmitted through different kinds of food. Whether that possibility becomes reality, however, is not decided in advance. It depends on how much we understand about the problem and what we do about it.

In his informative piece on 'The birth of BSE' (*Independent on Sunday,* 31 March 1996), Mark Watts notes that the long history of feeding animal protein to cattle suggests that it is not intrinsically dangerous. But he goes on, quoting Sir Richard Southwood (chief government adviser on BSE in the late 1980s), to point out that cattle may be ill-equipped to fight off diseases carried in meat products. So feeding them animal protein risks exposing them to disease. Watts is quite right. Yet the conclusion to be drawn is not that such feeding policies are inherently riskier than more 'natural' ones. It is that by understanding the mechanisms of disease humans can eliminate the problem: animal proteins fed to cattle should be properly sterilized, not banned. It was the relaxation of regulations relating to such matters in the 1970s that led to the development of BSE, not the feeding of animal protein to cattle in itself.

## Greenpeace always plays 'the trump card of uncertainty'

The striking thing is that we face less of a problem, less of a 'revenge of nature', today than in the past. Modern practices and methods are little more likely to cause disease than older methods. More importantly, modern society and science facilitates the detection and control of disease; the rapid diagnosis and containment of BSE is a case in point.

**The notion of** a 'revenge of nature' continually over-emphasises the negative consequences and side-effects of human intervention in natural processes. Worse, it underestimates the ability of contemporary science and society to tackle problems thrown up by human manipulation of nature.

As the example of BSE and animal feeding methods indicates, warnings against human hubris tend to run up against the facts of the matter in particular cases. But the revenge of nature thesis survives by simply sidestepping known facts and taking a step into the irrational. Its adherents emphasise the unknowable and unintended consequences of human action, and always assume that these consequences will be for the worst. Demanding to know how we can be certain that there are *not* new and deadly risks out there, they turn accepted practice on its head. Instead of the onus being on the scaremongers to prove their proposition that there is a link between BSE, beef and CJD in humans, others are now expected somehow to prove that there is not.

In a discussion of risk analysis focusing on the options for disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform, an editorial in *Nature* (7 March 1996) made the useful point that Greenpeace always plays 'the trump card of uncertainty'. The environmentalists did this, the journal suggested, because although they were dead-set against deep-sea disposal, they lacked the facts to make their case. Demanding 'how can we be totally sure that it is safe?' becomes an easy substitute for evaluating the evidence. The approach of Greenpeace is mirrored by others.

**The German sociologist** Ulrich Beck has built a whole sociological outlook on such an irrational procedure. Coincidentally, he was in Britain to address a conference on the 'Politics of Risk Society' when the BSE/CJD issue blew up in late March. It is symptomatic of our deeply irrational times that his intervention into the debate was supported by all and sundry. Before you could say *Götterdämmerung,* John Durant, Britain's first Professor in the Public Understanding of Science, was telling us how Beck shows that science is severely damaged and can only save itself by humbly admitting that it does not have the answers (see *Independent,* 1 April 1996).

Linking BSE to Chernobyl and the dangers posed by genetic engineering (the usual suspects), Beck warned that 'we are in danger of creating a situation where alarmingly large risks are nobody's responsibility'. 'Neglecting risks', he suggested, 'is one of the most effective ways of reinforcing them' ('When experiments go wrong', *Independent,* 26 March 1996). Beck condemned scientists for conducting live experiments on society without knowing what the consequences might be.

Beck's analysis, like that of Greenpeace over Brent Spar, uses uncertainty to build in an inflation of risks. He can then use this inflated sense of risk to cast doubt on the usefulness of social and scientific progress. Beck's theory of a 'risk society' is premised upon the possibility of the ultimate worst-case scenario—human extinction: 'I use the term "risk society" ', he writes in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk,* 'for those societies that are confronted by the challenges of the self-created possibility, hidden at first, then increasingly apparent, of the self-destruction of all life on this Earth' (p67). But just what might bring this about? Well, almost anything in the fantasy land of Beck. The abstract postulation of the possibility of extinction gives him a licence to discuss all new procedures in a fearful tone and inflate all known risks—from BSE to the fallout from Chernobyl.

The real risks raised by these specific issues are repeatedly exaggerated by Beck, Gray and all of those now warning of a revenge of nature (for the facts on BSE see the centre pages of this issue of *Living Marxism;* on Chernobyl, see 'Meltdown as metaphor', in the April issue, No89). However, the facts of the matter do not appear overly to concern Beck. By playing on uncertainty, he absolves himself of any obligation to respond to those who outline facts refuting him. In this way, he turns the revenge thesis into incontrovertible dogma.

The development of the revenge thesis to this point has many harmful consequences, besides the obvious belittling of our existing, highly developed knowledge of the world and its problems. It can only mean that any novel technologies and procedures should not be tried, since the risks involved cannot be foreseen. The consequence of this line of argument is that we are robbed of any chance of learning from our actions. Instead, the caution advocated by Gray is elevated into the prime directive of all human action. Yet the surest way for us to feel swamped by the problems of modern society is to stop trying to do anything about them.

**The fact is** that there are risks in new procedures, and there are unforseen consequences. But this is no bad thing. We make progress precisely by overcoming problems. And, you never know, the unforseen consequences might carry benefits. 'Live experiments' in which the outcome was unknown in advance have been the source of new knowledge and achievements down the ages. By contrast, the 'revenge of nature' idea belittles both humanity's past achievements and our current ability to deal with problems. A call for caution in the face of risks also robs us of the chance of proving our abilities in practice.

In his 'Nature bites back' piece, John Gray at least pointed out that 'everything that is worthwhile' in modern society comes from the fact that we are no longer dominated by the vicissitudes of nature. A point he should bear in mind is that these achievements were made by people who regarded nature as a force to be controlled, and risks as problems to overcome. ●

**John Gillott is convening the course *The Greening of Society* at The Week conference in July (see page 31).**

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# THE WEEK Morning courses

## Redrawing the Boundaries of Humanism

**Convenor: Frank Füredi—author of *Mythical Past, Elusive Future* and *The New Ideology of Imperialism***

Today's intellectual climate is hostile to social experimentation and the potential for humans to make their own history. This course outlines a materialist approach to making humanism relevant for our times.

**The subject in history ◆ Marx's engagement with humanism ◆ The reaction to reason ◆ Rescuing the subject ◆ Confronting caution**

Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*, Polity
Istvan Meszaros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, Merlin, 1975
Frank Füredi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future*, Pluto, 1992

## Beginning a Marxist Critique

**Convenor: Suke Wolton—editor of *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory***

This course seeks to separate important developments in society from the current trivialisation of politics. In the process, the discussion will take people through a Marxist approach to understanding the world today.

**A materialist critique ◆ Women and social change ◆ Nationalism and ideology ◆ Demanding freedom ◆ Making history**

Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Junius, 1995
VI Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Junius, 1994
Franz Jakubowski, *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*, Pluto, 1990

## Gender, Culture and Relativism

**Convenor: Jennie Bristow from Genderwatch**

This course will examine how the popular 'gender-focus' to discussions of development has distorted the real problems facing the people of the Third World, and has been manipulated by Western governments and agencies.

**The creation of the Third World woman ◆ The female circumcision debate ◆ The relativist defence ◆ Who's empowering whom? ◆ No change without freedom**

H Pietila & J Vickers, *Making Women Matter: the Role of the United Nations*, Zed Books, 1994
J Peters & A Wolper, *Women's Rights, Human Rights*, Routledge, 1995
Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Junius, 1995

## Rights and the State

**Convenor: James Heartfield—books editor for *Living Marxism***

A critique of the new forms of state power, this course examines the real meaning of ideas like 'enabling' and 'governance' . It will ask how the case for democratic control can be made today.

**The critique of power ◆ Class rule ◆ Police and thieves ◆ The empowerment myth ◆ Tyranny of the majority**

Frederick Engels, *The Role of Force in History*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1968
Peter Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, Victor Gollancz, 1995
David Rose, *In the Name of the Law*, Jonathan Cape, 1996

## Evening courses

Is the Market Triumphant? **Convenor: Sheila Phillips**

Theorising the Ci

## Globalisation and Power

**Convenor: Norman Lewis**

The aim of the course is to present a critique of current theories of globalisation, and provide an alternative framework for conceiving the main determinants of international relations in the twenty-first century.

**Globalisation, the West and the rest ◆ The moral condemnation of the South ◆ Global power and sovereignty ◆ Globalisation, continuity and change ◆ The world is still in a state**

**M Featherstone, S Lash, & R Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities*, Sage, 1995**
**P Hirst & G Thompson, *Globalisation in Question*, Blackwell, 1996**
**N Lewis & J Malone (introduction) and VI Lenin, *Imperialism*, Pluto, 1996**

## The Greening of Society

**Convenors: Dominic Wood and John Gillott—author of *Science and the Retreat from Reason***

This course will examine the mainstreaming of environmentalism, and take a critical look at environmental issues from global warming and the loss of biodiversity to business ethics and sustainability.

**Environmentalism: reposing the issues ◆ The character of environmental protest ◆ The greening of the market ◆ Sustainable development: implementing environmentalism ◆ Confronting the politics of limits**

**Murray Bookchin, *Re-enchanting Humanity*, Cassell, 1995**
**Richard North, *Life on a Modern Planet*, Manchester University Press, 1995**
**Richard Leakey & Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction: Biodiversity and its Survival*, Weidenfeld, 1996**

## The Education Debate

**Convenor: Claire Fox—lecturer in Further Education and the Education editor of *Living Marxism*.**

Education is now posited as the answer to everything from saving the economy to rescuing moral values. This course will question conventional wisdom on issues like qualifications, curriculum, and comprehensives.

**Learning the limits ◆ Is everyone special? ◆ In loco parentis ◆ Learning for life—vocationalism ◆ Lifetime learning—lifelong dependence**

**J & P Leadbetter, *Special Children*, Cassell, 1993**
**JM Halstead and MJ Taylor, *Values in Education and Education in Values*, Falmer, 1996**
**Phil Hodkinson & Mary Issitt (eds), *The Challenge of Competence*, Cassell, 1995**

## Genes and Behaviour

**Convenor: Helene Guldberg**

This course will question the influential notion that human behaviour is shaped by the interaction between genes and environment, and will explore the uniqueness of human beings.

**Are human beings unique? ◆ So what is human nature? ◆ What is wrong with the interactionist model? ◆ What's in a word? ◆ Humanity and nature**

**Luria & Vygotsky, *Ape, Primitive Man and Child*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992**
**Gribben & Gribben, *Being Human: Putting People in an Evolutionary Perspective*, Phoenix, 1995**
**CIBA Foundation, *The Genetics of Criminal and Anti-Social Behaviour*, John Wiley, 1996**

**ty Convenor: Dave Cowlard** | **Reconstructing the African State Convenor: Barry Crawford from Africa Direct**

# WEEK Afternoon courses

## Victim Culture

**Convenor: Ann Bradley—*Living Marxism* columnist and medical journalist**

This course will examine how conservative and feminist thought now interacts and converges around the powerful culture of victimhood. The aim is to provide a coherent alternative to victim culture.

***Fin-de-siècle* fatalism ◆ The discovery of abuse ◆ The explosion of risks ◆ Men at risk ◆ Celebration of powerlessness**

H Roberts, SJ Smith, C Bryce, *Children at Risk? Safety as a Social Value*, Open Univ Press
R Mawby and S Walklate, *Critical Victimology*, Sage, 1994
W Kaminer, *The Recovery Movement and Other Self-help Fashions*, Addison-Wesley, 1993

## Policing the Family

**Convenor: Ellie Lee**

Domestic violence and the abuse of children are seen as major problems of our times. This course examines contemporary attitudes to the family, and seeks to assess the impact of greater state intervention into family life.

**Public and private ◆ Women, men and the family ◆ Parenting ◆ Policing men ◆ Children's Rights**

Diana Gittins, *The Family in Question*, Macmillan, 1995
Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly and Jill Radford, *Women, Violence and Male Power*, Open University Press, 1996
Anna Coote, *Families, Children and Crime*, IPPR 1994

## Reconstructing Social Engagement

**Convenor: Sabine Reul**

Discussions of gender, difference, morality and risk now all express the view that we cannot expect to achieve very much. This course will discuss how the power of people to change the world can be reposed for our time.

**What makes us human? ◆ What happened to freedom? ◆ Gender, sex and fatalism ◆ Real empowerment ◆ Rebuilding humanity today**

Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, 1992
Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, New Left Books, 1970
Suke Wolton, *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory*, Macmillan, 1996

## Media, Culture and Mystification

**Convenor: Phil Hammond from the London International Research Exchange**

This course examines popular approaches to understanding the media and culture, explores their importance for developing a critique of contemporary society, and advances an alternative view on the role of critical journalism.

**Is the medium the message? ◆ 'Informed choices': the moral agenda of media studies ◆ The limits of culture ◆ The myth of cultural difference ◆ Distorted communication and heretical journalism**

James Curran & Michael Curevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society*, Edward Arnold, 1991
Richard Hoggart, *The Way We Live Now*, Chatto & Windus, 1995
Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies*, Blackwell, 1993

## Evening courses

Counter-Culture: Rebellion and Reaction **Convenor: Rebecca Young**

## Saving the Third World from Itself

**Convenor: Helen Searls**

The Third World is now seen as an uncivilised and dangerous place where human rights are violated and people need to be protected. This course will explore what lies behind this new humanitarian concern for the Third World.

**Reversing the moral equation ◆ Human Rights and the new humanitarianism ◆ Governance ◆ Gender and development ◆ The myth of empowerment**

Frank Füredi, *The New Ideology of Imperialism*, Pluto, 1994
John Harris (ed), *The Politics of Humanitarian Intervention*, Pinter, 1995
Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, OUP, 1995

## Social Control in an Uncertain Age

**Convenor: Rob Knight**

Society is increasingly being organised through new forms of state control. This course will examine these changes through themes such as the erosion of private space, the fear of crime, and the restructuring of the state itself.

**Nanny gets tough: social control in the 1990s ◆ Suffer little children: the juvenilisation of society ◆ An Englishman's home?: the erosion of private space ◆ Is there a 'culture of crime'? ◆ The diverse state**

David Rose, *In the Name of the Law*, Jonathan Cape, 1996
National Deviancy Conference, *Permissiveness and Control*, Macmillan
R Jowell et al (eds), *British Social Attitudes: 12th Report*, Dartmouth, 1995

## Coping Strategies for Capitalism

**Convenor: Phil Murphy**

The conventional economic wisdom of our times is that, despite the problems of capitalism, there is no alternative to the market. This course investigates what, if anything, has changed to justify this new belief.

**Downsizing and the US economic 'renaissance' ◆ Depending on the state ◆ Living off services ◆ Going global ◆ The rise of Asia**

Henryk Grossman, *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System*, Pluto, 1992
VI Lenin, *Imperialism*, Pluto, 1996
Paul Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity*, Norton, 1995

## Justice, Liberty and Rights

**Convenor: John Fitzpatrick—lecturer in Law at the University of Kent at Canterbury and Director of the Kent Law Clinic**

At every level people are turning to the law today, whether to defend themselves from their neighbours or to promote constitutional change. This course will examine the impact of these developments on the key ideas of justice, liberty and rights.

**The protection racket state ◆ Equal before the law? ◆ Rights versus responsibilities ◆ The legalisation of politics ◆ Justice and freedom**

Bob Fine, *Democracy and the Rule of the Law*, Pluto, 1983
Roger Smith (ed), *Shaping the Future: New Developments in Legal Services*, LAG, 1995
Jeremy Waldron (ed), *Nonsense Upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man*, Methuen, 1987

## Re-posing the Problem of Progress

**Convenor: John Gillott—author of *Science and the Retreat from Reason***

For tickets or more information about the conference, phone

## Jan Montague on (0171) 278 9908

or write to her at **THE WEEK**, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX,
fax (0171) 278 9844, or e-mail: lm@junius.co.uk

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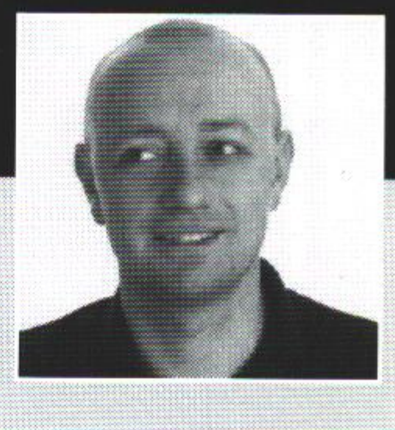
TOBY BANKS



# Fridges ice 'em

I have warned before of the dangers of accidents in the home. However, the BSE debate has cast a new light on things. For instance, according to reports by the Association of British Insurers and the Department of Industry's Consumer Safety Unit, many times more people were killed by fridges last year (290) than by the beef that may have lurked within. Not to mention 1303 hospitalisations caused by slippers, five by dustpans, and a shocking 11 by underwear. Government guidelines are being prepared as I write, yet once again it is a case of too little, too late.

The children's charity Kidscape says that small children sometimes push one another over, and occasionally stab one another with pencils. Or, to put it another way, as the *Daily Mail* does, 'Bullies as young as three are running amok in nursery schools'. Worrying stuff, yet surely as nothing when set beside the ordeal of three-year old Morris Michener, who was terrified out of his wits by a performance of *Peter Pan* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. Of course, Tony Blair and the National Society for the Prevention of Accidents may point out that *Peter Pan*, with its transvestism and violence, is unsuitable for children. (The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents might add that the clock-swallowing crocodile is a bad example for adults as well as children.) However, the Micheners are from Suffolk, where Blairite role models are thin on the ground. All the same, it seems they can work the system as well as any Islington school governor, and are currently claiming compensation for 'extreme distress' (a very reasonable £150—they obviously are not the sort to make a fuss about nothing). Meanwhile, the Cahanas, a Danish couple whose daughter was recently reduced to tears by the Duke of Edinburgh's traditional brusqueness (girl: 'I'm six'; duke: 'so what?') will be watching developments with interest

It is always good to see the police taking steps to improve communication with the public. So the news that CS gas is now in use (the first person to be subdued was a one-eyed rugby league international in Oldham) should be balanced against the fact that anyone unfortunate enough to be sprayed with it will be given a leaflet telling them not to be naughty again—sorry, I mean, 'explaining what has happened to them' and what side-effects they can expect to experience. Given that one effect is likely to be 'unsightedness', I trust that volunteers will be on hand to offer full counselling services—and to read the leaflet to them.

I don't want to be too hard on the police though, because they do solve the odd crime now and then. I am happy to report that I received a press release from the Suffolk Constabulary, complete with Charter Mark, reporting that Suffolk police have solved the 1888 Whitechapel murders normally attributed to one J Ripper Esq. Perhaps now this tiresome business has been sorted out, Ipswich's finest can get on with some more pressing problems. Having helped out the Met, they could lend their colleagues in Gloucestershire and Warwickshire a helping hand. Apparently, police 'believe' that lawn-mowers stolen from Cotswolds gardens are being smuggled into former Eastern bloc states. Some people will believe anything it seems. All the same, an advisory leaflet seems to be the least they could do.

I am reluctant to go too far down the 'only in America' path, for fear that I may be forced to eat my words by the time this magazine hits the streets. (The latest pressure group is trying to get scent-free public spaces, in which the wearing of perfume is banned.) However, I find it hard to picture a day when gossip is banned by British law. Yes, yes, I know about 'Careless talk costs lives' and 'Even walls have ears', but that was different. I am talking about real gossip—the kind with which the British have traditionally idled away their tea-breaks and washing days.

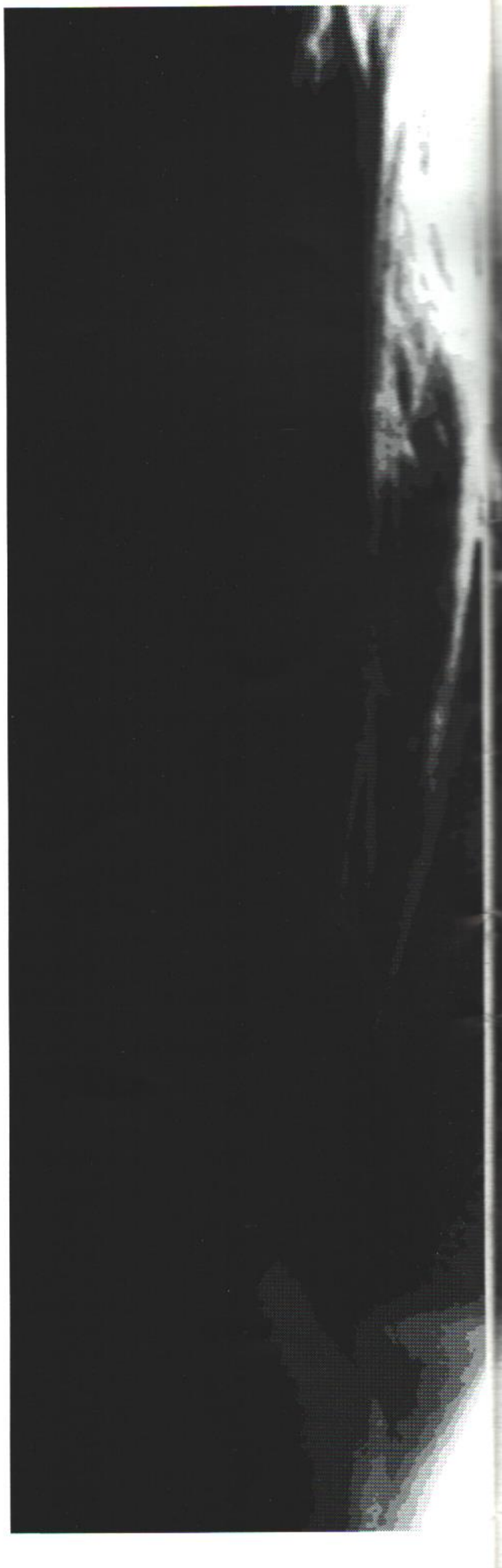
Yet in Seattle, this is precisely what has happened. Concern has been expressed in important quarters about the city's public housing projects, in which, apparently, there is a problem of 'residents talking about other residents'. This has prompted the housing authorities to designate 'community areas' in which notices warn that gossip may not be exchanged. It is suggested that residents discuss the state of their apartments instead—an idea our own local authorities would surely never encourage.

Nude trainspotting, in which enthusiasts take photos of one another posing naked on Railtrack rolling stock has just been made a criminal offence. How sad that other areas of innocent pleasure are still at the mercy of 'naturists'. So I was delighted to hear that the South Coast Olympian Football League is holding out against Stavely Athletic, a team of naturists who have been trying for four years to join the league. League secretary Lindon Betts put the argument against with restraint and dignity.

'I know these days you've got to be PC and everything and treat every freak or pervert like they're special or different or something, but think about it, it's not going to happen. Who's going to turn out to play against a bunch of men with no clothes on? Other perverts, obviously. And if you think I'm going to sanction games that turn virtually into Roman orgies, you know, with all sorts going on, then you're sadly mistaken. And practically as well, I mean, how on Earth can you run around with it all flapping about all over the shop? Surely that's injurious to health. [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, take note.] And boots, what about boots? I'm sorry, but no one in their right minds would even think of giving them a game. I think it's disgusting. I'm afraid I don't want to discuss it a moment longer.'

Mike Threlfall of Stavely Athletic is considering taking the local Football Association to the European Court of Human Rights. ●

# Adult fantasy



## *Kids* has been denounced as a depraved film and a paedophile's dream. In fact, says Paul Bryan, it is a moralist's fantasy

'I have seen the future of grunge film-making in America and it is bleak.' *Daily Mirror*

'One of the most painful films I have seen.' James Ferman, Britain's censor-in-chief

'This film is desensitising people to paedophilia and child sex.' Valerie Riches, director, Family and Youth Concern

'Most worrying is its message to the impressionable.' *Daily Mail*

Even before the British release of Larry Clark's film *Kids*, there has been much wailing and gnashing of teeth from the nation's moral guardians. The film's spliff-taking, head-kicking, foul-mouthed teenage stars have been accused of elevating selfishness, immorality and hedonism and of setting up the off-yer-face slacker as a role model for today's youngsters. Many critics fear that *Kids* might become a magnet for the dirty mac brigade and encourage paedophilia. So what's all the fuss about?

Set in New York City, *Kids* is a documentary-style film that follows the lives of a group of fictional teenagers as they wander aimlessly about doing not very much in a less than action-packed 24 hours. The main focus is on the sexual adventures of two of the characters—New York's self-declared 'virgin surgeon' Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick) and his frustrated pal Casper (Justin Pierce).

Telly, we are told at the outset, likes virgins: 'I love em. No diseases, just pure pleasure.' Indeed, breaking-in the uninitiated is Telly's whole life. The opening scene sees our lispy hero, clad in bright underpants, trying to persuade a middle class young thing, about twelve and in knickers, to take the plunge. She lies on her bed surrounded by cuddly toys and Beastie Boy posters. He's insistent, she acquiesces.

But Telly is more than just a virgin surgeon. He's a (potential) virgin killer too. He has AIDS but doesn't know it. And that is the film's central 'irony': Telly sleeps with virgins to be safe, but he himself is the source of the danger.

We know that Telly has HIV because a previous virgin quickie-receiver, sixteen-year old Jennie (Chloe Sevigny) has had some bad news from the STD clinic. She is distraught and desperate to catch Telly before he kills someone. The rest of *Kids* is a race against time (even though the whole film rambles along at a summer strolling pace). Will Jennie catch the unwitting killer before he homes in on his next teenage feast, 14-year old Darcy (Yakira Peguero)?

Telly and Casper, meanwhile, are stealing beer from a shop and money from their parents, smoking weed with waster friends, watching skate-board videos, beating-up passers by, partying and boasting about their sexual conquests. At one point, Telly holds up his moist fingers triumphantly to the sun for Casper to sniff. 'Uhm, butterscotch', Casper enviously chirps.

Far from being a celebration of moral debasement, *Kids* is an old-fashioned fairy tale, with wicked witches, wounded angels and an urban jungle in which a nasty wolf is on the prowl. And the wickedest witch of them all is the one that is missing—the absent parent.

'Where's mommy, where's mommy?', sobs Jennie from a payphone, after discovering she's infected. Mommy, of course, is not at home. Indeed, besides Telly's hopeless mother, who is too busy minding her latest sprog to notice anything, and a twinkle-eyed taxi driver who hit-and-runs with a few pearls of wisdom for Jennie, the only adults who seem to be remotely on the same planet as the kids are the oh-so-caring AIDS counsellors. By the end of the film all four of the main characters look set to die from AIDS. This, says director Larry Clark, is down to the attitudes of the

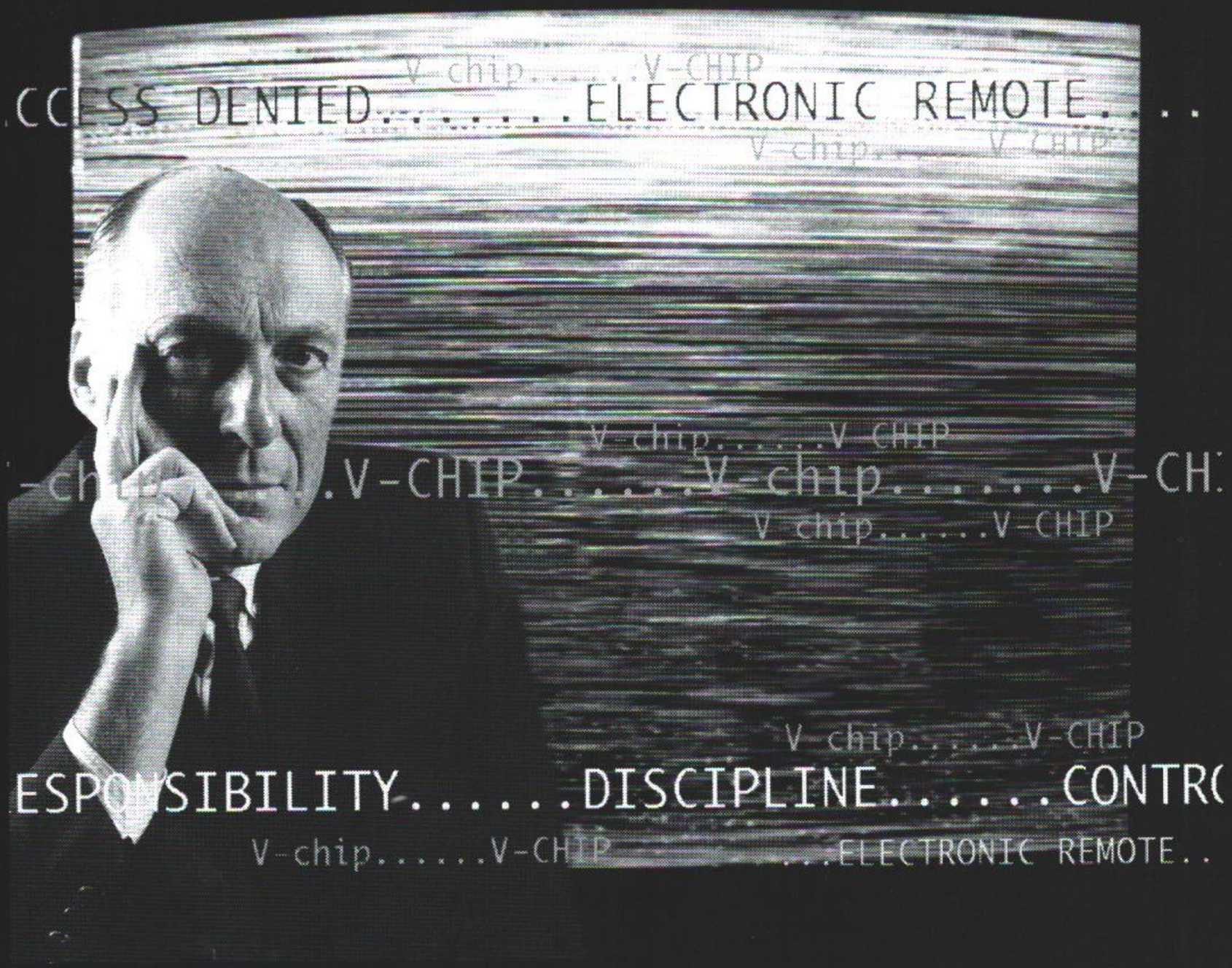
PHOTO: ELECTRIC PICTURES

parents: 'We should look our kids in the eye one-to-one, but we don't have a clue.'

The newly Liberal MP Emma Nicholson has demanded that the film be banned because she fears that, despite its 18 certificate, 'it will inevitably be seen by younger children'. But this is to miss the point. *Kids* is not a film for children, but, as the *New York Times* put it, a 'Wake-up call to parents'. If you don't watch over your kids, the film says, you might as well condemn them to death.

According to an NSPCC spokesman, *Kids* could be used as child pornography. For a start, *Kids* has much less sex than the hysteria surrounding it might lead you to believe (I counted three acts). What is troubling are the rumours that Scotland Yard's Paedophile and Child Abuse Unit demanded a private screening. According to James Ferman, chair of the British Board of Film Classification, the police required proof that all actors involved in the sex scenes were above the age of consent. Now, it seems, you have to be 16 before you can even pretend to have sex, never mind go the whole way.

If there is anyone indulging in lurid fantasies about young people, it is the moralists. Bizarrely, many critics have seen *Kids* as a true-life portrayal of teenage life. This idea was given weight by the fact that a 19-year old, Harmony Korine, wrote the script, apparently based on his own experience of growing up in New York. In fact, it didn't quite happen like that. Korine wrote not his life story, but what director Larry Clark wanted his life story to be: 'I told Harmony that the film was about a skater who likes to collect virgins, and that one of them—a girl he's had sex with earlier, and he's the only boy she's had sex with—turns out to be HIV positive. She later finds him partying and confronts him.' The film, like the script, makes out that it is about the real lives of teenagers in order to promote a sensationalist, moralistic fantasy for adults. ●




PHOTOS: MICHAEL KRAMER /MONTAGE: ALEC CAMPBELL

# We don't want chips with everything

Andrew Calcutt puts two fingers up to the V-chip

'In a swift response to the Dunblane massacre', the *Sunday Times* reported in March, 'the government is planning legislation to ensure that all new televisions are fitted by law with a "V-chip"—an electronic device which will allow parents to scramble violent or sexually explicit programmes to prevent viewing by children'.

'In a swift response to the Dunblane massacre....' Am I alone in being unable to recall any connection between Dunblane murderer Thomas Hamilton and screen violence? What I remember from the media portrayal of Hamilton's life is that he was an outdoor man who would probably have preferred *Tarka the Otter* to *Terminator 2*. But the facts of this gruesome case seemingly had no bearing on the ensuing response: almost any out-of-the-ordinary violent event today becomes the trigger for a debate about the need to exercise greater control over screen images. As a result, heritage secretary Virginia Bottomley is now considering following America's example and requiring all new TV sets to contain the V-chip. The device, she claimed, could be a 'new opportunity to reinforce parents' responsibility'.

**Now film censor James Ferman (above) wants to tell parents how to raise their children**

Three years ago, the video nasty *Child's Play 3* was widely reported as having influenced the killers of Jamie Bulger. Little attention was paid to the subsequent revelation by the investigating police officer that the killers had not even seen the film, still less been influenced by it. You might as well blame it on *The Railway Children*, he quipped. Nevertheless the controversy over *Child's Play 3* led to tighter controls on videos being introduced into the 1994 Criminal Justice Act.

Today, the idea that 'violent images= violent behaviour' is so widely accepted that, following Dunblane, nobody had to bother making the connection—it was simply taken as common sense. And what started out as an irrational attempt to blame the media for murders committed by an unhinged and isolated individual, has ended up as a popular demand for monitoring and regulating the behaviour of all adults, in other words of sane, rational human beings.

Supporters of the V-chip claim that the device empowers parents, unlike previous forms of 'gatekeeping' censorship which put power over what we can see and hear into the hands of unelected bodies like the British Board of Film Censorship (now renamed the British Board of Film Classification). The suggestion is that, equipped with a combination of 'consumer advice' and microchip technology to screen out inappropriate material, parents will be in a better position to make 'informed choices' on behalf of their children.

But talk of empowerment is misplaced—unless we are talking about the empowerment of a new layer of officialdom. For the V-chip to work, every video, TV programme and Internet image will have been submitted in advance to a new body with the remit of classifying all on-screen material. This would require a state censorship apparatus of unprecedented magnitude. Advocates of the V-chip insist that the new board would be there only to serve parents and enhance their discretionary powers. But the putative V-chip board will draw up its own categories; and parents would be expected to suspend their interpretation of what is suitable for their own children in favour of the board's classification of appropriate viewing. This is not 'empowering parents'; it is an expansion of professional influence over our lives.

Britain's chief censor James Ferman has issued an ominous warning. 'Definitions will have to be made', he claimed. 'The children who most need protection are the ones least likely to get it. It will be the irresponsible parent...who won't use the V-chip.' In Ferman's eyes, the responsible parent is one who defers to his 'consumer advice'; parents who make up their own minds, disregarding official instructions, may be labelled 'irresponsible'.

This is a new version of 'nanny knows best', in which the state increases its controlling influence over adults under the pretext of facilitating greater parental control. While the child submits to parental discipline, the parent in turn must submit to the authority of those who claim to know what's best for them and their children. Measures advanced ostensibly in the interests of child protection have the effect of sending us all back to the nursery. ●

# Singalonga Mahler?

## Louis Ryan on why he doesn't want to cuddle up to Mahler's adagios

From the Sex Pistols to George Michael, spats between artist and record company are common, even expected, in the pop world. The world of classical music likes to think of itself as being above such wranglings. So there was quite a stir when Claudio Abbado, chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, took his own record company, Deutsche Grammophon, to court. Abbado claimed that by releasing a compilation album of slow movements from his Mahler symphonic cycle, the company compromised the artistic integrity of his performances.

Abbado's court action fired up a new debate between purists and populists. For the purists, classical compilation albums aimed at the mass market are, like Classic FM, a threat to civilised values, distorting and trivialising, as they do, great art. The populists, on the other hand, claim that only by producing pop versions of the classics can we bring classical music to the masses. In fact both sides are a quaver short of a crotchet.

Whatever the purists may claim, the compilation album has been a staple of the classical world since the inception of the gramophone record. When, for example, the harpsichordist Scott Ross recorded the complete works of Domenico Scarlatti over more CDs than I would care to remember, most of us non-specialist Scarlatti lovers were grateful that he also issued a personal selection on a single disc. No one objects when the works of different composers are brought together in performances by a single artist. After all, such 'recital' albums only reflect normal practice in live performances. And as for opera, 'highlights' discs are a standard part of the classical catalogue.

Indeed, opera recordings reveal that there exists a virtual continuum from complete works to random excerpts. Only the most serious Wagnerian, for instance, is likely to own a complete Ring stretching over some 15 CDs. Less committed listeners may own single operas, a single CD of highlights or perhaps a single CD with highlights of several Wagner operas. And those entirely new to classical music may come across Wagner in an aria on a CD containing a medley of composers and compositions.

For decades popular compilations have provided accessible foothills for the often forbidding peaks of the classical repertoire. In the 1960s, CBS' Greatest Hits and Decca's World Of series were pioneers of this approach. These records generally focused on a single composer, presenting a wide-ranging yet balanced selection of his work. Through different facets they managed to suggest a broader unity; they afforded a pleasant overview, yet also indicated the peaks that lay ahead. Unlike so many compilations today, the recordings were drawn from among the finest in the catalogue—just one indication of the care given to the whole enterprise.

The old classic compilation was designed as a sampler that opened up a new world. Today's best-selling compilation is, by contrast, typically mood music.

The two-CD *Classic Moods*, for example, promises 'Tranquility, solitude and melancholy' on the first CD and 'Dreams, fantasy and nostalgic romance' on the second. *Classic Weepies* suggest tears without traumas while *Classic Sleepies* provide non-chemical soporifics for our health-obsessed age. This is not introducing classical music to the mass market, but culling the classical back catalogue to create high-class ambient music. It is wallpaper music—and there is about as much incentive here to explore the music further as there is to examine the patterns in the wallpaper.

The real distinction to be made is not between the purist and the populist, but between popular presentations that seek to draw you further into the wonders of classical music and compilations that anaesthetise you to the possibilities of wonderful works. The Mahler adagios disc which so upset Abbado is an upmarket version of mood music—long, languorous extracts from the slow movements of Mahler's middle symphonies. This would be the right sort of disc for making up to someone on the sofa—all that lush orchestration but with a tinge of soulfulness as well. It is a James Last album for those too conceited to listen to James Last.

If people want schmaltz, there is no shortage of it on the market. But to cut up and repackage Mahler as some kind of lush experience is to degrade great art. ●

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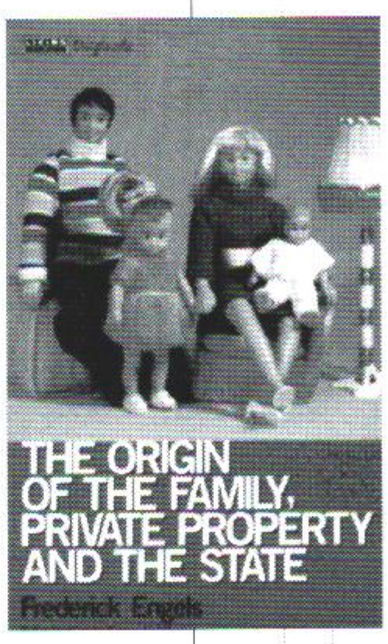


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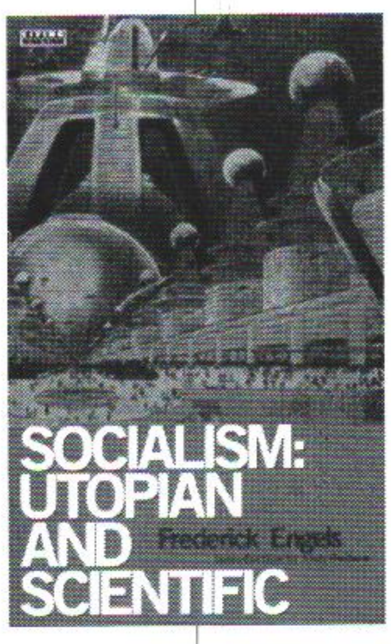


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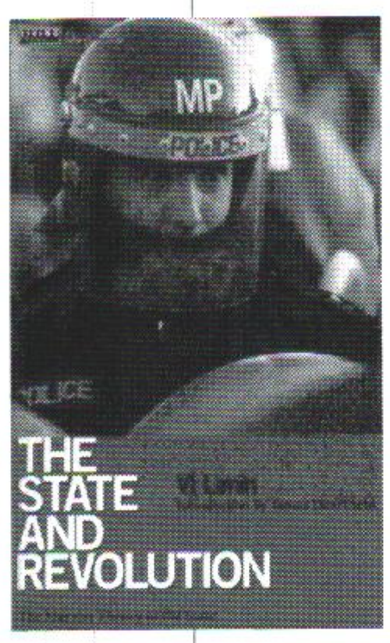


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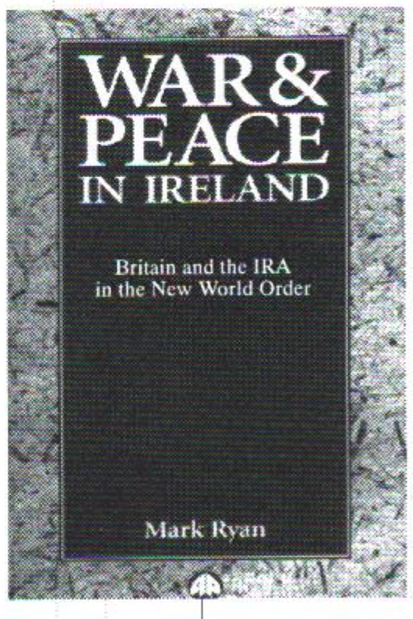


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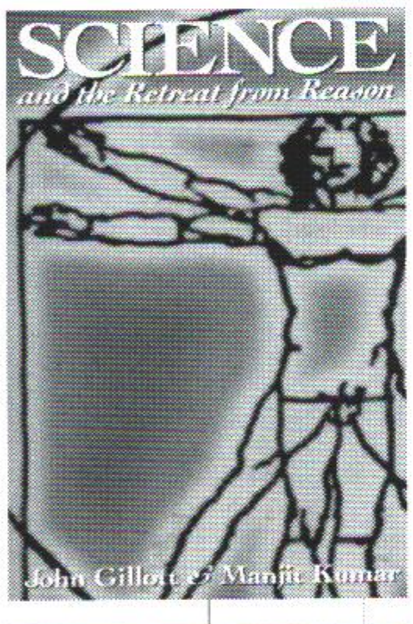


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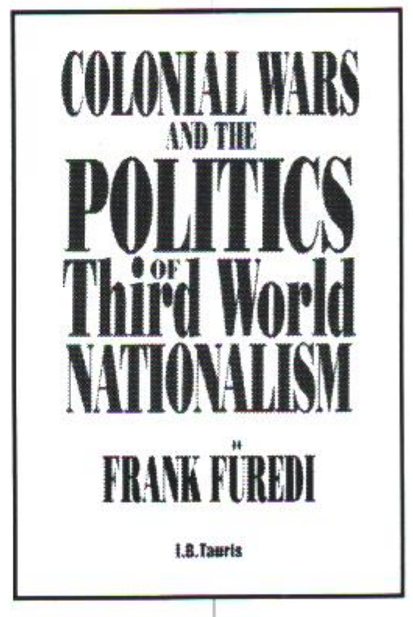


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THE MARXIST REVIEW OF BOOKS

Linda Ryan looks at the debate about masculinity

# The trouble with men

**Masculinity in Crisis,** R Horrocks, Macmillan, £42.50 hbk £15.99 pbk

**Masculinities,** RW Connell, Polity Press, £12.95 hbk

**Just Boys Doing Business? Men, Masculinities and Crime,** T Newburn & EA Stanko (eds), Routledge, £13.99 pbk

**Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities,** IM Harris, Taylor & Francis, £12.95 hbk

Masculinity, so psychotherapist Roger Horrocks reports, is in crisis. The expectations of what it is to be a man today are confused and uncertain, or even held to be a problem. 'Masculine values' like assertiveness, self-possession, comradeship and courage were once seen as traits whose virtue was beyond question. By and large it was accepted that men exemplified those values, as part of the natural order of things.

In the traditional view, women's characteristics, though subordinate to the manly virtues, were equally natural to them: home-building, deference and caring. Woe betide the woman who upset the natural order by standing up for herself. She would be called 'butch' or unladylike. By the same token, men who were shy, cautious or deferring were seen as deficient or effeminate.

But today many of those old certainties are being questioned and their value challenged. The idea that a woman's place is in the home is difficult to sustain when women make up almost half of the workforce. But it is not simply the case that men's monopoly on go-getting is being challenged. The very desirability of those traits traditionally associated with masculinity is being challenged too.

In the series of essays, *Just Boys Doing Business?* edited by Tim Newburn and Elizabeth Stanko, the advantages of male values are called into question. In a study of 'Cop canteen culture', Nigel Fielding argues that 'hegemonic masculinity' among policemen reinforces hostile and violent attitudes towards suspects and many sections of the public, while fraternal solidarity actually provides a shield against accountability and adverse criticism.

Many of the 'manly virtues' that were once seen as evidence of a healthy natural order, today seem to be interpreted as inherently pathological conditions. Assertion leads to violence, self-possession, according to Roger Horrocks, leads to a kind of autism, and comradeship becomes men's closed-shop against women, while hard courage conceals a want of care.

In a daring move, Horrocks, and sociologist RW Connell, whose *Masculinities* is an excellent example of the new theory, argue that men, as much as women, are victims of the pernicious imposition of masculine values upon them. Horrocks and Connell show that the expectations society has of men to behave in a masculine way have become an onerous burden, leaving men insecure about their ability to measure up to the ideal. Roger Horrocks argues that 'in becoming accomplices and agents of the patriarchal oppression of women, men are themselves mutilated psychologically'. The militant form of masculinity represents a considerable self-abuse and self-destruction by men. 'In hating women the male hates himself.' (p182)

Horrocks gives a personal example of the way that the demands of masculinity can become a burden to men:

'I remember my fierce anxiety about being male when I was an adolescent in a Lancashire town, and went around in a gang of lads to pubs, dances and parties. We had a strict code of behaviour and watched each other like hawks to make sure that we all followed it. Any divergence was instantly spotted and ridiculed. For example, the fact that I stayed at school until I was 18 was treated with great suspicion: it wasn't manly.' (p95)

Perhaps the underlying meaning of the macho joshing had more to do with social class than gender, and perhaps Horrocks' perception of his peers' disapproval was greater than their real actions warranted. But still the picture he paints is clear enough to illustrate his meaning.

On top of the burdens of society's expectations of men, the seeming improvement in the status and social position of women, it is argued, now challenges men's confidence in their masculinity. As the chorus of feminist-inspired criticism of men and masculine values grows, so men react defensively—doubting themselves, yet reasserting their masculinity in caricatured and brutish form. ▶

According to J Taylor Gibbs and JR Merighi's study 'Young black males', in *Just Boys Doing Business?,* these pressures are felt all the more keenly among groups of men who are already marginal. They perceive an assertive machismo in black Americans that they think is both a defensive reaction to racial disadvantage, but also a spur to violent criminality, such as drug-dealing and shootings. What they call pseudomasculinity 'is thus conceptualised here as a mediating factor between marginal social identity and criminality'. Gibbs and Merighi expand: 'that is, the young black males who develop "macho" behaviours as a defensive strategy to counter their feelings of marginality will be at a greater risk for anti-social behaviours than those who deal with marginality with more pro-social adaptive strategies' (in *Just Boys Doing Business?,* p80).

### What masculinity theory does not say is that *men* are predisposed to crime

Any argument that takes as its starting point the association of race and crime should be viewed with caution. The history of police and court discrimination against black Americans and Britons is too well documented to support the view that it is blacks who have a problem obeying the law, rather than the law that has a problem with blacks. On the other hand, Gibbs and Merighi are not saying that black people are innately disobedient, as a traditionally racial explanation of black crime might. Rather they insist that the 'pseudomasculine' identity is one reaction to racism available, and a negative one. This is a 'hate the sin, not the sinner' argument.

In fact this association of masculinity and crime is not restricted to blacks or Americans. In *Just Boys Doing Business?,* subtitled *Men, Masculinities and Crime,* the incipient criminality woven into the masculine identity orders the studies. However, what masculinity theory does not say is that *men* are predisposed to crime. Indeed Horrocks argues forcefully that those feminists who say so are themselves expiating their own aggressive feelings by projecting them on to men—'therefore I insist: it is not men who are intrinsically violent, but certain societies which are violent and warlike and genocidal' (p136).

All in all the theory of masculinity seems to be hard to assess. On the one hand, it appears to be very radical in its rejection of traditional sexual stereotypes. On the other hand, it seems to lend itself quite readily to reactionary ideas about the problems of violent criminality, though blaming masculinity, not men, for that. Let's look at some of the theoretical underpinnings of the argument to see if we can understand it better.

The contemporary theory of masculinity derives its method of analysing gender relations from feminism and sociology. Like the feminists, masculinity theorists reject the idea of a natural basis for gendered identities. While conservatives celebrated the supposedly feminine values of home-making and childcare, feminist critics challenged the idea that these were traits natural to women.

Instead, the feminists argued, we should see these qualities as the product of the way that women are socialised in a patriarchy. Socialisation meant that women were raised and taught to accept inferior roles in society. The feminists rejected the natural condition of sex as an explanation of the differences between men and women, and concentrated instead on the social condition of gender. Gender, unlike sex, is a learned condition. The feminists argued that the position of women in society was due to gender, not the natural condition of sex.

Today's theorists argue that the feminists were mistaken in criticising female gender exclusively, since that methodology assumes that masculinity is the proper norm and ideal, and that the feminine gender is correspondingly deficient. As if women should consider themselves to be just imperfect versions of men, and should aspire to correct that situation by making themselves more like men, and win the position that men have. Instead, say these authors, we should criticise the male gender, which is the gender role that is truly deficient, because it is violent, acquisitive, immature, uncaring and so on. In many ways, they say, the qualities of the feminine gender are superior—caring, nurturing, and the like.

The key component of the masculinity theorists' method is taken from feminism. They see 'men' as a product of society, and male qualities as being socially constructed through the process of socialisation. In Ian Harris' seven-year study of 560 men, published as *Messages Men Hear,* distinctive patterns in the way that men are raised, and the expectations that are reinforced throughout their lives are recorded. In that method of investigation, Harris, like Connell and Horrocks rejects the traditional conservative view of manly virtues as innate or natural attributes of humans who possess the right chromosome.

On the face of things this is the correct method. Marxists, too, emphasise the social origins of the differences between the sexes. It is intrinsic to capitalist societies that the reproduction of the working classes is conducted in the home, rather than in a slave compound or communal dwelling, as in previous societies. Consequently, the work of raising children, feeding, clothing and caring for the workforce is the one area of society's endeavours that is still done privately, as domestic work, while all other tasks, from spinning to tool production have been socialised. The persistence of a discrete arena of domestic work under capitalism is the basis of the sexual division of labour that has tied women to the home and hobbled them in the labour market.

### If sexual differences are not natural, but social, then they can be changed for the better

The implications of this kind of understanding are clear: what has been done can be undone. If sexual differences are not natural, but social, then they can be changed for the better. If, however, these differences are natural or innate, then they cannot be changed. Any attempt to transform human nature is bound to fail. For those who believe in the possibility and desirability of social change, therefore, the theories of masculinity might seem a step in the right direction.

However, in important respects the current interrogation of the masculine gender is deficient. It reproduces all of the problems of the conservative explanation of sexual

difference, because it treats these as being static, or fixed, as if, indeed, they were natural properties. It is odd that Connell and Horrocks should accept that certain traits are 'masculine' and others 'feminine'. In this sense, masculinity theory simply takes over the old schematic division of masculine and feminine, except that it reverses the plus and negative signs, holding masculine qualities to be deficient, or pathological, instead of seeing them as the standard.

How is it that what started out as an avowedly social explanation of masculine attributes ends up treating them as if they were natural deficiencies? In large part the error arises in an unconscious switch from an analytic mode of argument to a moral argument that treats traits associated with masculinity pejoratively. It is one thing to say that men learn their behaviour in typical ways, leading to typical patterns of behaviour. However, in condemning these types of behaviour, and indeed caricaturing them, the argument has shifted. What started as a dispassionate investigation of gender has turned into a moral condemnation of masculinity. What were considered as types of behaviour are now instead condemned as faults. In judgemental mode, these supposed flaws are now treated as innate deficiencies of the masculine gender, rather than malleable characteristics that are associated with the male sex.

A second, further problem confounds the theorists of masculinity. While they seek to question the supposedly natural basis of masculinity, they do not go far enough in questioning the natural order of society. In this theory, gender relations are no longer seen in absolute terms, and so there seems to be some room for reforming them by changing the way society operates. However, at a deeper level, society is still seen as nothing more than so many individuals relating to each other. Treating 'society' as if it were simply the sum of interpersonal relations, gender theory accepts the individuated character of capitalist society as if it were naturally given.

**Incapable of looking beyond the level of interpersonal relations, gender theory cannot see the possibility of social change**

This can be seen in Connell's schema of social determinants. Connell places 'power relations', 'the overall subordination of women and dominance of men' first, as the primary determinant of social organisation, above, for example, 'production relations' (p74). But this is to stand society on its head. What is consequent upon the organisation of capitalist society, the exclusion of women from social life, is seen as logically prior. Connell's method is not, as he claims, to look at gender as it is constructed by society, but rather to interpret society through the prism of the relations between the sexes. Society is treated as an outcome of personal life, not personal life as the outcome of society. This is the flaw in Harris' study too. It concentrates on the way that men are acculturated into masculine roles, meaning that it is overwhelmingly concerned with the arenas of family life or cultural life, and with personal relations, to the exclusion of any deeper investigation of the way that society is ordered and reproduced.

Incapable of looking beyond the level of interpersonal relations, gender theory cannot see the possibility of social change. Instead, change can only come through changing the behaviour of individuals. Hence men must change their pathological behaviour, but real social change is impossible. This is why gender theorists oscillate between confidence that men must change and pessimism about the possibility of such change. After all, they assert, men have a vested interest in the status quo, even though they suffer from it in the long term.

Of course, these problems in the method of masculinity theory would be of little account if they were just errors. But the conclusions of masculinity theory chime with other, practical trends in society that are of a reactionary nature, and masculinity theory gives a justification for these. To fully understand these trends, we have to take a more critical view than that found in masculinity theory.

**It is not that men are losing out to women, but that the whole of the working class is losing out on high-paid, full-time jobs**

For example, the presumption that women are overtaking men in the world of work does not bear up to examination. While women make up 49.6 per cent of the workforce, half of those jobs are part-time jobs, paying part-time wages. The major change is not so much that women's position in work is improving, but rather that the core, industrial workforce, traditionally a male bastion, has been savagely reduced in the past 10 years. These are high-paid jobs lost to the workforce as a whole. The increasing proportion of women in work is only a relative increase as men's position has been undermined.

Seen in this way, the changes should be assessed differently. It is not that men are losing out to women, but that the whole of the working class is losing out on high-paid, full-time jobs. The changing sexual balance of the workforce reflects that loss. The idea that 'masculine' expectations of the world of work are out of date is a way of lowering everybody's expectations. The values that are denounced as 'masculine' turn out to be the entirely positive expectation of a good job, and the security to pay for a mortgage. Doubtless the personnel departments of firms up and down the country will be denouncing such 'macho attitudes' as they lay off full-time workers and replace them with part-timers.

In today's circumstances of low employment and low wages, of limited political opportunities for resisting those changes, those values traditionally called 'masculine', of self-confidence and camaraderie, are out of step with what capitalism can offer. Attacking those qualities, in the guise of criticising masculinity helps society's elites to get everybody used to the new conditions of lowered expectations and a conservative outlook. However, they are precisely the qualities that one would need to challenge the current state of affairs.

The idea that men were all courageous or self-asserting was always false, as indeed was the idea that women were inherently meek and submissive. The current discussion of masculinity, though, proposes the emasculation not just of men, but of everyone, women included. Its critical stance is reserved exclusively for any reaction against the new order, but it leaves the basis of that order untouched.

# READ ON

**Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights,** Nadine Strossen, Abacus, £7.99 pbk

Nadine Strossen of the American Civil Liberties Union has provided readers with a much-needed attack on the ever-increasing demands for censorship in the USA and Britain. Her work centres on disputing the arguments of leading pro-censorship feminists, like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who argue that censorship is needed to protect women.

Strossen's argument is to identify the blatant irony in feminist demands for censorship. Those she calls the 'MacDworkinnites' are 'cutting off one's nose to spite one's face'. The MacDworkinnites' belief that pornography leads to rape, and so should be legislated against 'disavows individual control over thoughts and actions, assuming that viewers [of pornography] will react in a "monkey-see, monkey-do" fashion'. 'This debased view of humanity', says Strossen, 'is invoked to justify legal controls'. Rejecting the case that women need to be defended against the power of pornographers, Strossen challenges, 'what could be more degrading or dehumanising than this view...that women are powerless to consent to pose for pornographic depictions'.

This is an excellent book, whose only modest fault is that it gives too much credence to the idea that women's sexuality can be liberating by virtue of its mere expression. That view takes on board the fetishisation of sexuality that is at the heart of the pro-censorship position.

*Erik Heilmann*

**The Nemesis File,** Paul Bruce, Blake Publishing, £15.99 hbk

In this unintentionally chilling account of SAS murder in Ireland, Paul Bruce tells how as a 'tough, idealistic young trooper in the SAS' he was despatched to Northern Ireland to 'execute unarmed IRA suspects in cold blood'. Under the secret code sign Nemesis, literally meaning 'the goddess of retribution; hence one who avenges and punishes', the SAS elite set out to harry and ultimately to destroy the IRA.

Bruce attempts to chronicle the 'mental breakdown of crack SAS troops ordered to carry out the dirtiest job in a secret war'. He wants our sympathy. Apparently many young SAS troopers found their operations unsettling and suffered sleepless nights. My heart bleeds for them. After his first undercover operation, in which he shot two unarmed IRA suspects in the face, point-blank, Bruce suffered flashbacks and nightmares. 'As long as you don't think of them as human beings', his commanding officer counselled, 'you'll be alright'.

This advice seems to have resolved any qualms Bruce might have felt about political assassination and sectarian killings. His next killing was done with ease, his victim described here as a small, sneering rat with a 'ferret-like face'. Again the suspect was unarmed as Bruce shot him 'full in the face' and, as he lay on the ground, twice in the chest to make sure he was 'well and truly dead'. 'I felt good afterwards', Bruce writes, 'I hadn't liked the little runt from the moment I saw him. I hadn't liked his sarcasm or his attempts to put down the SAS'. But there did not always have to be a reason for killing people. The fact that they were Catholics was enough: 'Throughout July 1972 orders came thick and fast encouraging us to go into the streets more often, to select Catholic victims, knock some of them off and take potshots at others.'

The book has caused a stink among Bruce's former commanders, who find it an unwelcome addition to the official series of SAS hagiographies. With Britain trying to pass itself off as honest broker in Ireland, the last thing the British army needs is an account of its own atrocities. Bruce claims that up to 27 bodies of murdered IRA suspects were secretly buried in unmarked graves and has drawn up detailed maps indicating where he believes the bodies to be. Whatever the truth of these allegations, we can be sure that this is one case of a mass grave that won't be tried by a UN tribunal—after all, war crimes are not supposed to be committed by the British army, are they?

*Brendan O'Neill*

**Big Brother: Britain's Web of Surveillance and the New Technological Order,** Simon Davies, Pan, £9.99 pbk

This might be one of Britain's last years as a free society, according to Simon Davies. He says that all the instruments of the surveillance society predicted by George Orwell in his dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have already been put in place by stealth.

Networking technologies, he says, could connect close circuit television and the information derived from identity cards, as well as the more humdrum technologies of cell phones, cash and credit cards to create a complete surveillance society. These things have been allowed to happen because of the increasing climate of unquestioning consent pervading British society. It is this climate, says Davies, which has tended to obscure the wholesale erosion of our civil liberties. He thinks that the incursions on our freedom are not happening through direct oppression, but by the extension of military surveillance technology into civil society.

Davies examines the integration of systems of surveillance, like 'real time tracking' through cctv and swipe cards, as well as photographic recognition technology and data matching. However, his near exclusive concentration on the technologies of surveillance, means that he does not explain the political and social conditions that have allowed these changes to go unchallenged. Unless you can put a strong case against the argument that we are all at risk from crime and terrorism, beliefs that are ultimately perverse, you will never be able to challenge the surveillance that people demand in response to those dangers.

*Robert Clowes*

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