

Letters

CLIMATIC PROBLEMS

Bush (*MTDec*) expounds the new orthodoxy that famine has little or nothing to do with drought. This is an understandable reaction to the view that all human suffering can be blamed on natural disasters. However, climate does pose a major problem to producers in the semi-arid areas of Africa. Herders and farmers have to base their strategies on the expectation of large fluctuations in rainfall from year to year.

In the case of the West Africa n Sahel, rainfall in 1984 was at an abysmal and unprecedented low throughout the region. The River Niger was at the lowest level since records began in the late 19th century and farmers I spoke to had never seen such total crop failure. The consequences of this drought were especially severe because the terrible harvest of 1984 came after several years of very low rainfall and because few areas were spared these appalling conditions.

Bush also claims that it was 'only with the onset of colonial contact that local food systems and survival strategies broke down'. This is hard to reconcile with what is known of pre-colonial society in the Sahel. People faced regular food shortages then, just as they do now. Strategies for dealing with famine existed, including raids on the grain stores of less well-defended neighbours and the 'pawning' of family members in exchange for grain. These strategies enabled some people to survive the food shortage but, as in modern famines, the most vulnerable members of society were forced to absorb the worst of the crop failure shock.

Camilla Toulmin, London

UNNATURAL PHENOMENA

While Ray Bush (*MFTDec*) is right in pointing out that famine is not a natural phenomena, but is closely related to the inequalities of the world capitalist economy, he plays down the role of domestic class interests in accounting for famine within particular countries.

Parts of India have come close to famine several times since independence not for the causes that Bush cites, for India has a relatively small foreign debt, negligible agribusiness penetration and has been little affected by war, but because of the way in which the rural class system distributes the burdens of poor agricultural seasons bringing the landless and nearly landless near to starvation.

The interdependent nature of the class system means that the famine process, leading ultimately to death, is often slow and not 'sudden' as Bush suggests. In the penultimate but

reversible stage of famine, calorie consumption can remain very low for many months. But it is the final irreversible stage of famine where individuals' body weight has fallen by a third and where apathy and derangement have set in that is commonly misconceived as the beginning of a famine. Hence the high mortality rate in relief camps days after individuals have been admitted.

To recognise the importance of domestic class interests in causing mass starvation is also to open a gap for policy action which may catch famine in its early stages. In India widespread famine has been avoided by the provision of rural employment schemes and subsidised food. It may therefore not be necessary to wait for changes in the global system before doing something about famine.

Simon Hunt Newcastle

SANE DISCUSSION

I would like to congratulate you on the wide-ranging and courageous article on the famine in Africa (*MT Dec*). Most of the Left in Britain is totally resistant to any sane discussion of 25-year old war between Ethiopian governments (whether of capitalist or military socialist varieties) against the Eritrean people.

The *Morning Star* and Liberation continually pretend that the Socialist Eritrean People's Liberation Front are merely bandits who are supported by the CIA and right-wing Arab regimes. This is a lie as anyone who has bothered to do the most cursory research into the problems in the Horn of Africa will tell you.

The Ethiopians spend a grotesque proportion of their budget on continuing their war of occupation in Eritrea. Their whole economy is geared towards the production of cash crops like coffee to pay for arms. Some of the most fertile areas of the country in the South have been used to grow cash crops like coffee throughout the famine. I defy anybody to tell me either that their agricultural policies or their attitude to their own ethnic minorities in Oromo areas, Tigray, Wollo or the Ogaden represent a new form of progressive socialism for Africa as I have heard representatives of Liberation claim.

Few socialists in Britain have made serious attempts to investigate the tremendous advances that the Eritreans have made towards achieving equality and the involvement of women and the different nationalities and religious groups in the areas they control. Certainly the revolution in Eritrea has as much if not more to recommend it to socialists in Britain than the repressive and chauvinistic military

regime of the Ethiopian Dergue.

Andy Gregg, London

IRRITATING JARGON

I buy and read Marxism Today mainly for the discussion on what should be "the aims of socialists in the modern world. I have long since accepted that the hopeful socialist ideals of my early teens, in the 30s, need revision in the light of events. But I still find it unthinkable to accept modern capitalist society as indefinitely tolerable, or insusceptible to modification and change.

I am grateful therefore to those who, like Stuart Hall (*MTDec*) address themselves to these problems. But I do wish they would do so in language more simple and more concrete. To give one or two examples: 'By realignment, I mean a fundamental regrouping of people and ideas across the existing boundaries, initiating a process by which the Left slowly and painfully acquires the capacity to address its own crisis.' And: 'The failure of the Left to refract these new realities within its own perspective on the future is the result of a series of interlocking developments.'

I am not sure what these sentences mean, but, if they mean something, could it not have been said more simply, more clearly? One finds too, jargon words, which while not obscure, tend to irritate the reader and lose their sympathy, eg, 'impossibilists', 'prioritise', 'politicise'.

It occurs to me that, if the Left is to regain the lost initiative, it is just as important that it should speak in a language which is clear to ordinary people and has a direct, persuasive impact, as that it should review and clarify its aims and its strategies.

Harry Solomon, High Wycombe

INCONVENIENT FACTS

Stuart Hall's defence of Left 'realignment' (*MTDec*), and his attack on what he, following the media, calls the 'hard Left', might be more persuasive if it did not depend upon ignoring certain inconvenient facts.

First, he attempts to appropriate feminism for the campaign for 'realignment', and suggests that the 'traditional Left' has failed to appreciate its importance. Not surprisingly, therefore, he makes no mention of the women's movement which sprang up in support of the miners during their year-long struggle. Nor does he mention the fact that this movement had the unstinting support of Arthur Scargill and the national leadership of the NUM.

Secondly, he makes no mention of the race issue. Yet such support as there is in the Labour party for black sections, which Stuart Hall himself supports, has come from that

'traditional' or 'hard' Left which he wants to see 'isolated'.

Thirdly, he suggests that we, the Left, 'have mercilessly neglected' the 'force of democracy' as a revolutionary idea over the years'. Whoever else he may be referring to here, it can certainly not include that most conspicuous of 'hard' Left figures, Tony Benn. No socialist politician has campaigned more consistently over the past 10 years and more on the need to democratise British society and its institutions.

Anthony Arblaster, Sheffield

CROSSING SWORDS

One hesitates before crossing swords on economic matters with a *Financial Times* writer, but I cannot let pass without comment Michael Prowse's very critical review of *The peculiarities of the British Economy* by Fine and Harris (*MTJan*).

He criticises their use of out-of-date statistics. He overlooks that they are illustrating that Britain's economic decline is regardless of Thatcher government policies. Some may regard that as a missed opportunity but their intention is for a less polemical overview.

Why privatisation of state-owned industries is not a sharp break with past policies is, they claim, that benefits from nationalised industries have already been going to private producers eg, developments in mining machinery and finished steel production. One could add - and cheap coal.

Although the section on economic strategy warranted more discussion, the authors' principles for an alternative strategy are given: 'intervention in and controls over the operation of the markets that have a crucial concentrated role in the economy' (eg, foreign exchange and credit markets) and 'state ownership of major sectors to enable them to operate according to the principles of the interventionist, planned system'.

Fine and Harris's book has many interesting insights into the British economy and will repay study and discussion.

Edwin Dare, Essex

MR WONDERFUL?

The profile of Sir Terence Conran in (*MTJan*) was a grovelling tribute to another 'self made' (and aren't they all) millionaire who has doubtlessly earned his place in Thatcher's 'Mr Wonderful' hall of fame but has certainly not earned a full page in a CP journal. I had to check and make sure it was *MTJ* was reading and not the *Observer* business news where I can waste through this piffle any Sunday.

In the course of this article we learned among other things that Sir Terence was fond of food and wine

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but that he 'could not pretend to be a political philosopher.' Surprise, surprise!

The article itself was not only lacking in political analysis, it wasn't even interesting. The most startling thing I recently learned about Mothercare shops is that they don't even provide feeding/changing facilities for mums. I don't know how successful they were, but one thing I do know is that Sir Terence didn't get his knighthood for services to mothers and their babies.

Paul Watts, Bootle

MISLEADING TERMS

Anna Coote's feature (MT Nov 1985) on the political relevance of the 'reproductive sphere' of social life would have been more credible if its relationship with the productive, industrial sphere had been described in economic, rather than cultural terms.

The economic function of the family has for long been in decline as the power of international capital and the scale of industrial technology have grown in their domination of industrial relations. Therefore, any relationship between the labour movement and the unemployed or low-paid families with children, for example, is best viewed from the economic perspective of the workplace with their dependants.

Most significantly, the requirements of *individual* households can be assessed in relation to the prevailing economic conditions, with employment vacancies and welfare benefits being allocated according to need and availability. Thus, a family with no income-earner could be given priority for work over one which had a member in employment (regardless of the sex of the applicant): and a household with a large family would not be allowed to deprive a childless couple of much-needed financial assistance.

Accompanied by socialist central planning, such a system should not only ensure a fairer distribution of income and wealth, but would also allow greater accountability to be taken of the needs of the family unit at any given time.

John Parsons, Northampton

FACING UP TO REALITIES

Much as I admire Richard Dyer's other work, it is hard to regard 'Sex and Ballet' (MTJan) as more than tangential to the realities of today.

Something like a third of the article, for example, is taken up with gender issues. Sex, of course, is fundamental to the appeal and function of dance, but amongst today's audiences I don't believe homosexual appeal has anything like the importance Mr Dyer

ascribes to it, while amongst performers sexual orientation has been always much less important than how well you do your job as a dancer.

More urgent for audiences and performers is a serious study of the position of performance dance in post-metropolitan-authority, *post-Glory of the Garden* Britain. This should embrace not only gender issues but also funding, class analysis, community arts, racism (of which there is disturbing evidence in classical ballet), training opportunities, and the difficult issues of form, content and dancer-audience communication.

I hope future issues of *Marxism Today* may address these problems to help all of us in the dance profession.

Peter Brinson, London

A FORGOTTEN CLASS

Unfortunately Stuart Hall (MTDec) jumped on the current trendy left bandwagon of wanting to be 'more progressive than thou'! This involves sounding the premature death knell of the 'traditional' working class and their industries.

But one of the lessons that the Left must surely take note of in its realignment is its failure to adapt to the reality of the present. We should certainly plan ahead - but we don't have to pretend that the future's already here. Some on the Left act as though the industrial worker was buried years ago along with the cloth cap and clogs image. It's become almost a forgotten class of workers.

The left champions the cause of trade union rights at white collar GCHQ but there wasn't a whimper of TUC support of threats of a 'black out' of Britain when 700 striking steelworkers were sacked for defending trade union rights at Sheffield Forgemasters in December. Similarly the miners' strike and its militancy has become an embarrassing memory for the Left.

It may be embarrassing to the Left's clean cut 'middle class' image but the fact is that most people, especially the Left's supporters, don't work behind desks. Too many people don't even have jobs. Their struggles are the struggles that the Left should be fighting for here and now.

Richard Hallatt, Sheffield

MISSING THE POINT

David Pithers' piece (MTJan) on the causes of the horrifying cases of child abuse which have recently come to public notice misses the most important factor: most child abuse is perfectly legal.

The law entitles parents to bash and thump their children providing they do so only 'moderately'. Indeed, not only is it legal, it is widely socially

acceptable. (Doubtless many *Marxism Today* readers who like to consider themselves progressive have 'slapped' and 'smacked' their children). In such circumstances there are bound to be some parents who go 'too far'.

But they are only the most extreme cases of a much wider phenomenon which has already gone much too far. All parents who hit their children may damage them (emotionally if not physically) and help to perpetuate a cycle of violence. Part of the defence submission for Morris Beckford was that he himself had been beaten as a child.

It's an extraordinary fact that children, the weakest members of society, are the only people not legally protected from physical assault. Or perhaps, given the way the law tends to favour the powerful at the expense of the powerless, it's not extraordinary at all. But in any case, until society changes its attitudes towards hitting children - and this includes making it illegal, however 'moderate' - then some children will be murdered by their own parents.

Jane Ashley, London

REAL FAMINES

The article on famines by Ray Bush (MTDec) was exceptionally tendentious and selected very badly on editorial standards at *MT*. He entirely fails to point out that the most devastating famines in the 20th century (Russia 1921/2, USSR 1932/4, China 1960/2) took place in state socialist countries. Furthermore, a number of African countries with food problems are countries that have consciously chosen a socialist orientation and their agricultural problems are not entirely unrelated to that fact.

20th century famines have generally been caused by governments (eg, wars, coercive changes in the relations of production in agriculture). The fact that some of them, including the worst ones, have occurred in countries ruled by Communist parties is a matter to which *MT* might give some attention. Blaming the CIA and the multinationals is childish.

Michael Ellman Amsterdam

WORTHY AND ADMIRABLE
Bob Geldof and Live Aid, and even David Edgar, when he praised them in passing, have been spat on in print by countless sanctimonious leftists to whom ideological purity is evidently more important than food (where others' lives are concerned).

So *thankyou* for the recognition, mundane though it may be in other contexts, that Live Aid was fundamentally a worthy and admirable thing.

Patrick Curry, London

SACRED TEXTS

It was very helpful that Stuart Hall (MT Dec) disregarded quotations from 'sacred' texts in his analysis of actual reality, in laying the groundwork for reshaping a large and effective Left. Certainly the contribution was in the spirit with which Marx would often readily modify certain theoretical generalisations - on the basis of open-minded observation of actual events. It is regrettable that limited space apparently obliged him to deal with some issues very schematically and sometimes superficially.

One issue of fundamental importance, was the gross underestimation implicit in his analysis of the prime necessity, for the very survival of the human race, of achieving the broadest possible coalition of opposition to the continuation of the arms race.

The situation reminds one of how broad anti-fascist coalitions ultimately defeated the fascist effort to achieve world domination almost 50 years ago. Yet today, that danger is surely dwarfed by that of rapid nuclear annihilation of life on earth.

Not only does this greater danger afford opportunities for the Left which are much greater than those of the 30s, but it *requires* acting on these opportunities.

Gene Schulkind, London

We welcome your letters for the March issue. They should be no longer than 200 words and arrive at the off ice not later than February 10. The editor reserves the right to cut letters.

