

## Onward and Upward

David Edgar's gallant attempt to rescue post-modernism for the Left deserves some encouragement, though I fear that it is rather like trying to save national socialism for socialism. Worth a try, and there were people who tried, but by and large the experiment ended in tears - in a night of long knives.

This is not to say that modernism is alive and well, or revivable, or even that it was not, in its day, a deeply ambivalent movement, capable of being mobilised in the service of communism, capitalism, fascism or imperialism. But it was certainly a movement of great and lasting significance, and it seems to me that any socialist cultural politics of the future would have to be built on its solid foundations rather than on the shifting sands of post-modernism.

My problem, though, when one comes to confront the intellectual debates that swirl around the subject, is that I find Habermas, the prophet of neo-modernism, not altogether convincing, and I find Lyotard, the persuasive post-modernist, singularly beguiling. And David Edgar is right to suggest that many of the compelling tunes of contemporary discourse fit much more happily into a post-modernist pattern.

The nub of the problem is the notion of 'progress'. Modernism, whatever else it may have been, was the embodiment of the 19th century spirit of optimism -

### Choices

I'd like to take issue with Jude Bloomfield (*MT*, March) about adverts for escorts and masseurs. You can't talk about prostitution simply in terms of sex and 'sexuality' - the point is that it's work and work under capitalism is coerced, is exploitative. But socialists don't simply declare that therefore no-one should be allowed to work until the revolution. Unfortunately we need the money now.

Why do people persist in treating sexual labour as a special case? I've had sex for money and I've also typed dissertations for money (see the 'services' column in the March *MT*). My 'desires' were not the point, my need for money was. And the typing took a lot longer and was far more demanding. And *both* were about selling my

onward and upward, growth, expansion, the explosion of knowledge. Yet in the post Stalin, post Auschwitz, post Hiroshima age, these beliefs in the inevitability of progress have been dramatically eroded. And already this has had an impact on politics. The Greens, in particular, are a post-modernist political formation with which it is easy for the Left to sympathise. Yet how can socialists, schooled in the modernist notion of progress, readily abandon such a major plank in their platform?

Where I find myself uncomfortable with post-modernism is in its apparent ability to throw out not just the bathwater of the Russian revolution but the baby of the French revolution as well. There is an anti-rationalist, nihilistic strand in post-modernism which indicates that behind the pastiche and the jokes there may be something altogether more unpleasant.

But of the importance to the Left of the debate to which David Edgar has drawn attention so persuasively I have no doubts at all, though it may be some time before the arguments are crystallised and the battle lines drawn.

Culture is central to the political debate and, recalling Edgar's beloved 1960s, it is no coincidence that the Maoist explosion that preceded 1968 was called the Cultural Revolution. •

*Richard Gott, London*

body and its abilities to someone else.

Obviously there are all sorts of constraints on choice and consent in all areas of our lives, and we're all constantly negotiating them. But that doesn't mean that the choices we make are false or invalid, or that we have no right to make them. Actually we often have no choice *but* to make them. Being called in by 'Restart' is far more coercive than being offered cash for a bit of sex.

I regard myself as a sex-radical. I see consent as the vital issue in sex. I do not regard prostitution as good (in any sense, really) sex. Actually I don't particularly see it as sex - I see it as work. Surely we know what Marxists should be saying about work? And whose side they should be taking. •  
*S Holdsworth, Edinburgh*

### Naivety

It was a shade naive of *Marxism Today* to imagine that any enlightenment, let alone good, could come out of an interview with Edwina Currie. What did Bea Campbell think she was doing? Exposing Tory pretensions? Deflating Ms Currie? Striking a blow for the NHS? I'm afraid very little was achieved in any of these directions. And it was bound to be so. For with no disrespect to Ms Campbell, it requires quite exceptional skill to use an interview successfully as a polemic.

### Abortion

While Alison Frater (*MT* March) is right that we should 'work to obviate the need for abortion', it is still essential that, until we reach this time, we identify the key points relating to abortion where we can intervene in the debate and on which we can act.

One of the main reasons that the abortion debate has been so heated, is precisely because it is about the destruction of potential human life.

Surprisingly, Alison Frater does not deal with this. Yet it is surely primarily why the moral Right has been able to hold its ground, and in the context of a reactionary government which upholds the sacredness of the family, to take the initiative.

Feminists have certainly not disregarded the significance of the fact that abortion means destroying a potential human life. How could we, when so many of us have faced the agonising decision of whether to continue a pregnancy or not? Yet we have not sufficiently been able to convey that we recognise that dilemma, and, in recognising it, why we still uphold women's right to control over her own reproductivity.

### Liberace

Kay Carmichael (*MT* March) really is the most frightful killjoy. Not only is the truth out about Liberace, but it seems she would have the noses of 'middle aged women in Britain and America' rubbed in the grubby sheets of their morning after dreams.

Surely, honey, we can enjoy a performance without first checking that the performer's kosher? Have a laugh and only have to wipe away a little tear, not destroy a memory, when the house lights come up? And why the venom for middle aged women? Did they *all* not know-

In the case of Currie the thing was almost certain to be a failure. As for that lady, she knew precisely what she would get out of talking to *Marxism Today*: four pictures of herself (including the cover) and an opportunity to say a number of things she believes in. She must have calculated that there was a very good chance of the media picking the interview up, and *The Guardian* did just that. Her obsession with self-advertisement has paid off once again. And no visible damage has been done to her cause. •  
*Derek Kartun, London*

A second point missed by Alison Frater is that support for the terms of the 1967 Act has held up consistently at over 80% of the population. This is an important counter to the moral Right which we should not forget. Of particular significance is the rapid rise in support for a woman's right to choose - from 37% in 1983 to 49% in 1986. Feminists can surely take some credit for this. Women's right to choose has always been the main emphasis of the pro-choice movement, tenaciously held on to through all the defensive battles.

Nevertheless, we have not yet been able to translate those positive aspects into improvements in legislation and provision. Alison Frater is right that we have not responded quickly enough to changes in reproductive technology and anti-abortion tactics. But if we could more positively use our recognition of the human dilemma involved and our wide - though as yet unconsolidated - support, we might be able to regain the initiative and, in this 20th anniversary year, begin to build on what we have won. •  
*Jane Woddiss, Birmingham*

or at least suspect? Even those who love their own gay sons? It's as silly as posing pensioners against gays, as if there was never a gay pensioner and gays never aged (Neil Kinnock please note).

OK, let's all be smug about Liberace. He wasn't one of us, neither left nor out, best left out - if we're going to pick on an AIDS victim in *Marxism Today*, he's a pretty safe bet. But what happens when the *South Wales Echo* suggests that the solidarity of London gays during the miners' strike was less real because...? •  
*Howard Smith, Stoke on Trent*

## Designer Socialism

*Marxism Today's* Valentine Feature (*MT* Feb) was the latest piece in the disturbing drift to 'designer socialism', an embarrassing contrivance cultivated by the magazine in recent months. As a CP member, I frankly find statements like 'The pleasure of purchase... should not be a ritual of guilt' insulting, and I would find it very difficult to defend or explain such bad taste to an unemployed or low paid person for whom a spending spree is an unknown pleasure.

If Martin Jacques is serious about extending the readership of *MT* to the unions and to working class people in general, and he should be, then its credibility and appeal has to be won by addressing the experiences and interests of those people in its pages. That credibility is undermined when important articles on unions, the Soviet Union and Labour's defence policy sit alongside recommendations to resist self-denial and purchase Lalique glassware (from £50 to £15,000),

## Riant Thinking

If Edwina Currie wants to 'find out what the Left are thinking' she reads *Marxism Today* (*MT* March). She wouldn't have got her money's worth out of the March edition then, would she?

Still, she could always cuddle up under her *Marxism Today* duvet cover with her case of *MT*

## Heartlands

I should like to respond to Jude Bloomfield's letter 'Sexual Politics' (*MT* March) in which she criticises the use of your heartlands column by escorts and masseurs. She implies prostitution as an inevitable part of these services - even if this were the case, I feel she engages feminist principles to overlook certain important issues.

But first, a gay escort (and we must accept, *per se*, that that's what they are) just might enjoy his work with an *MT* reader far better than their less enthralling usual type of clientele. Similarly, would I be naive to presume that masseurs advertising in *MT* might feel more empowered to say to prospective customers who ring them at home, that a 'massage' means just that?

Whatever the result, it is between the advertiser and the person replying. If it is paid sex then our concern should be that prostitutes have been hindered

futon sofa beds, filofax and boxer shorts, before dining out at Nouveau Quiche.

*MT's* treatment of style is vacuous and ill-informed. Covent Garden Stalinist chic is as far removed from the clothes styles of British youth as a chip shop from a couscous parlour. Pseudo-radicalism dressed up as style is transparent and even detestable to kids who might be poor but like to dress well. Plugs for Benetton, an organisation with South African connections, have no place in a Communist journal - nor have uncritical profiles of figures like Terence Conran and Sarah Ferguson.

The re-designed *MT* is a welcome progression. But let's be careful not to alienate the very people we wish to appeal to, with false populism and elitist marketing. *MT* won't sell in the workplace or unemployed centre unless it deals more substantively with leisure issues and addresses more accurately notions of style. The offensive content creeping in of late should be eliminated. • *Phil Henshaw, Brighton*

Italian wine and console herself that whatever the Left thinks, the Right still knows where it is going - 'I will be obeying my own class instincts and interests and will vote Conservative in the forthcoming election' - Auberon Waugh from the March edition of *Marxism Today*. • *Gillian Emerson, Kent*

in negotiating well paid and safe terms, because people seeking to eliminate such exploitation focus on the providers rather than the users of that service. The implementation of Ms Bloomfield's request would not lessen the occupation she prudishly derides. It would further damage those people she seems keen to protect by alienating them.

And yes, gay men should be 'immune' and have sanctuary from further criticism on aspects of gay life in *MT* and elsewhere. I get angry when hets (I can't help the presumption) disdainfully dictate on gay issues when they ought to politely request assistance in comprehending our lifestyle. The carefully used words 'taste', 'choice', 'silk and leather' thrown offhandedly into her letter, convey to me a concealed heterosexist dismissal of homosexual identity. • *Michael O'Dwyer, London*

## Tunnel Vision

How I welcomed Bea Campbell's article on local authorities (*MT* Feb). The tunnelled vision of local council politics is very destructive to many of the struggles that local council policies set out to support.

Women's politics and much of black politics are being adopted and contained by well meaning equal opportunities policies, focusing the totality of people's lives into anti-racist, anti-sexist, motions which often reflect the interests of the local officers rather than the local people.

The local state has replaced the political party, policies arise by way of memo and report not

## Triviality

I agree with David Edgar (*MT* March) that we live in a post-modern world, if by that he means one distinctly different from the 20s and 30s. There are indeed distinct architectural products of this world: out-of-town supermarkets, massive airports, inner-city gentrification, speciality shopping in redundant markets, 'atrium' office buildings and hotels, etc, etc. But this isn't what he means by architectural post-modernism (APM for short): he means a stylistic trend, not a practical one.

Yes, modernism had great shortcomings, and terrible mistakes were made in architecture under its influence. But APM throws no light on these problems, for the obvious reason that it isn't interested in the issues that absorbed modernists. These were: a new relation of society and aesthetics; a new relation of architecture and technology; new kinds of internal space - what buildings feel like inside.

from argument and political discussion. This is dangerous because many inside the Labour party and the local state appear to suppose that once policies come from the branch they are 'god given', and no officer can disagree with them. This has created a new moralism, which does not stem from solidarity but from the being *right*.

Political campaigning cannot be replaced by local authority administration and if women leave their struggles to the local authority publicity departments they will never be won or understood. •

*Su Maddock, Centre for Local Economic Strategies*

APM says, broadly, leave housing to the developers, technology to the engineers, and return to boxy cellular kinds of interiors. That doesn't mean all its products are bad. It does mean that it can't be expected to provide a critique of precisely those things which it chooses to ignore.

APM is a style; styles needn't be, and maybe shouldn't be, trivial, but this one is. The recent generation of young architects did not treat it with contempt because they were left-wing hacks or because they thought style in itself was unimportant but because *this* style ignored most of the things that interested them about architecture - and principally how it could get closer to people.

In fact APM is now defunct, both as a style and as a debate, and fashions have moved on. This doesn't mean that the problems of the post-modern world are understood or resolved, just that APM had nothing to contribute to them. • *Richard Hill, London*

