

Patriarchal Workerism

Marxism Today's 'new times' initiative is to be warmly welcomed but does it not require some attention to editorial consistency, especially where this relates to the all-important task of concrete policy formulation? This question was starkly illustrated in the feature article 'Old Age Creeps Up' (*MT* January) by Paul Johnson. If this was indicative of attempts to formulate an agenda for 'new times' then sadly it did it in the guise of a recapitulation of 'present times'.

If one had to sum up this article in two words then they would be 'patriarchal workerism'. The 'problem' of the burden of an increasing population of old people was defined in terms of 'our failure to produce enough children'. The solutions on offer were 'attempting to raise the domestic fertility rate', where it would be the 20 to 30-year olds who would be at the forefront of any such policy. The other major options considered were raising retirement age and/or altering benefit distribution through transfer welfare payments.

While the article emphasised that the reasons for the reduction in fertility are not fully understood, to identify fertility rate as the problem so uncritically ignores more issues

Dilemmas For Soviet Society

What a revealing afterthought by Soviet economist Aganbeyan (*MT* December): '...I forgot to mention that these reforms must be carried through democratically... decisions taken only as a result of discussion.' For the Soviet leadership still sets the goal of catching up with the West in terms of productivity and national income. 'Of course every family must have a car', declares Aganbeyan, though the Soviet people have never discussed the consequences and alternatives.

Already Moscow's traffic is badly congested. Parking places near apartment blocks are unavailable, at far fewer than one per household. Air pollution on the streets often exceeds the legal limit. Changing to a car-based society with urban motorways and vast parking lots is not only hugely costly and demanding on re-

sources and environment, it also disadvantages non-drivers, the young, the infirm, the visually-handicapped, the nervous and the safety-conscious. Will Soviet society face the obvious dilemmas? In order to catch up economically, their nuclear power programme is vital. Since Chernobyl many people are challenging it. Yet the leadership won't open up the issue to debate. Leading expert Academician Legasov committed suicide this year, after his questioning of the whole nuclear programme was not taken seriously (*Pravda*, Oct 19).

Socialist societies should be capable, more than capitalist ones, of taking decisions on social and global goals, rather than leaving it to economists and market forces. But no mechanism seems yet to have been incorporated in thinking about *perestroika*. #

Max Wallis, Wales

than it potentially solves. It is inconceivable to discuss this issue without some consideration of the increased ability of women to control their own fertility and exercise choice. Imperfect as these choices are, they remain tremendously important factors now and for the future and some acknowledgment of the mass of material inspired by feminist analysis was desperately needed here. Awareness of this literature would, perhaps, have resulted in more caution in discussing a 1980s' version of Beveridge's plea for women 'to stay at home and breed the new imperial race'.

The article was also heavily endowed with the 'inevitability' of this and the 'almost certainty' of that. The use of such imperatives reflected an analysis restricted to a consideration of welfare and employment policy. This reflected another weakness, namely the absence of any understanding of the state as an entity which extends far beyond these realms. The reality is that over the period discussed in this article the British state will be subject to a wide range of political and social pressures of which the demands of an increasingly aged population will be only one.

Ian Welsh, Hull

Youth Power Shortage

Paul Johnson (*MT* January) is mistaken in identifying the main problems of an ageing community as fiscal and economic. They are problems created by a shortage of young 'person-power'. This is especially so in the field of 'people-care'. In the public sphere this is reflected in difficulty in recruiting 18-year olds to nursing. In the private domestic sphere there are now fewer people to care for elderly relatives at home.

The increasingly high proportion of old people in the community, together with the correspondingly dwindling numbers of young people, merely highlights a situation that has existed for years and continues. This is the presence of unpaid workers in the home, mostly women who constitute an essential part of a capitalist economy but who are, as a rule, 'invisible'.

The narrow economic emphasis in Johnson's article on productive workers and their fiscal contribution to the state serves to obscure the large contribution in services made by this vast army of unpaid carers. Lest it be imagined by readers that it is only, or mainly, the productive work-

ers (a problematic term in itself) who contribute through their national insurance to the other older half of the population, it should be borne in mind that most of the funding for benefits and health-care come from direct taxation.

At present all people with an income contribute through taxation. If the income threshold were raised and those with very high incomes were taxed more than at present, there would be little problem fiscally. It is time that the mis-named National Insurance Scheme was abolished and contributory benefits replaced by benefit contributions derived only from direct taxation. The present scheme is not an insurance scheme, since old age is not an accident but a process everyone can expect to go through if they are lucky.

Thus the burden as such is not inevitably fiscal, but related to the necessity of care provision for dependent elderly, in a physical sense. Perhaps the problem could be resolved in the meantime by encouraging young people to enter 'caring' professions and to do voluntary care work instead of the Territorial Army or something equally 'macho' and unproductive in human terms. •

Barbara McLaughlin, London

Postmodern Encounters

May I commend Mr Hebdige for his cool and exciting swim through the anxious tangle-weeds of postmodernism (*MT* January). Baudrillard wants to kill women in deserts and kill all integrity in peoples' souls by proving that, since nothing is very certain or sacred anymore, we shouldn't worry about life. The big buzzword to replace reality is 'surfaces'. Well, the kids in Soweto and Sharpeville weren't massacred by surfaces, they were shot by very real bullets: bullets shot by people full of ideology.

The other phrase to explain the mess of 1989 is 'loss of centre'. Postmodernism is a totally Europeanist state of the mind, and intellectual panics about the loss of 'centres' and 'reason' have dominated Europeanist thinking.

To claim that the whole world is feeling the same kind of confusion as the postmodernists is daft. Are the peoples of Zimbabwe and Nicaragua freaking out about a 'loss of centre'? You must be joking,

they're in the business of creating centres.

How do we defend ourselves against these ghoulish philosophers who insist that we collapse our souls into a game of 'surfaces'? Strengthening our communities is one source of safety and optimism that Mr Hebdige curiously omitted. The point is to survive these days, and the point about surviving is collectivity. Imagine if black people, faced by the spectre of 400 years of Atlantic slavery, probably the most 'centreless' and irrational act ever, had just given up the hope, their collectivity, their determination to survive slavery? Black people have protected their 'centres' every day since 1520, and there are lessons in that for everyone.

Yes, these are chilling times; yes, the future does seem a cruel and uncertain mess, but none of us has the time to waste pretending that the global criminality of Europeans and their money is a delusion of 'surfaces'. We need our time for bravery. •

Jez Vanes, Bilston

Reconstructing Marxist Method

In a carefully-constructed article Dick Hebdige takes apart the concept of 'postmodernism' (*MT* January).

The 'debate' about postmodernism is taken, in an anglo-saxon context, to be an affair of a French intellectual revolution on a par with, say 'structuralism' and 'poststructuralism'. This is far from being the case. The tiny numbers of academics involved in this 'movement' (if one can call it this, given the huge differences between people like Lyotard and Baudrillard) can perhaps be seen in the almost universal indifference to the 'post-modernist' exhibition held at Beaubourg in 1986.

Secondly, there is almost nothing intellectually substantial in their concepts. Baudrillard's misunderstanding of Marx's basic concepts is notorious in France.

Finally, anyone who can take Lyotard seriously has my pity.

Inheriting The Earth

I don't suppose Geoff Mulgan chose his own heading 'The Power Of The Weak' (*MT* December), which suggests '... for they shall inherit the Earth'. He describes how they might better organise to do so, but first, he precedes from an unexpected consequence of contemporary automation.

As a technical journalist I would certainly like to confirm that automation, in its varied forms, far from pensioning-off all the humans, is pathetically dependent on their ministrations. The more sophisticated the technology becomes, the more intelligent are the responses it needs from its attendants. If its competitive benefits are to be reaped and its proprietors not bankrupted, these attendants must be well trained and committed.

British management who have been told that they must 'automate or liquidate' feel let down by automation, which has not liberated them from industrial relations.

To make matters worse, product quality, now central to international competitiveness, has to inhere in the manufacturing process. No longer can industry afford the time or money for post-production quality control. For both machine and product, the indispensable need is to engage

In his latest incarnation he believes that Kuhn and Feyerabend represent the most 'post-modern' theories in the sphere of epistemology! These begin from a totally arbitrary world-view. Their ontologies, like Baudrillard's peculiar 'end of history', are frankly, rubbish. By contrast, serious attempts to reconstruct marxist methodology, by such figures as GA Cohen, Roy Bhaskar, and even your own Gregor McLennan, are ignored.

The European Left is going through some drastic changes at the moment. This can be gleaned from the Communist Party dissidents' movement in France, led by Pierre Juquin, choosing to have contacts with the British Socialist Society rather than your part of the 'Euro-Left'. Given *Marxism Today's*, continuing move to the right one wonders who your allies might be. Perhaps Michel Rocard?

Andrew Coates, Ipswich

the operator in responsibility for the result. It is not so much that 'strong' control is counter-productive to this end, as that softly-softly is the only strategy for trying to establish the mutual trust by which alone the worker can be induced to identify sufficiently with the vital commercial interests of the boss.

As far as industry is concerned it doesn't seem very illuminating to highlight the means - 'weak' control - rather than the ends. And these are to incorporate more of the brains and will of the worker into his/her labour power. In this respect I am surprised that Geoff Mulgan did not refer to the role of culture, which we have recently discovered does not evaporate on passing through the factory door.

Globalisation of markets has traumatically exposed Britain to cultures of an entirely higher manufacturing and competitive potential. Japan, which has butchered large docile herds of Western industry, is now the mentor of its managerial practice. Japanese culture is devastatingly adapted to international competitiveness. Their prioritising of market share before profit, consensual decision-making and an employment policy that defuses resistance to new technology is just the tip of the iceberg. •

Harry Challis, Shropshire

Unions' Central Role

Philip Bassett (*MT* January) is right to argue that unions should adapt to the realities of the changed employment situation, but he goes much too far in elevating the role of personal and individual services as against collective bargaining. Behind his conclusion is the assumption that unions will remain weak vis a vis the employers.

It is significant that his article does not mention the spate of anti-union legislation enacted by the Thatcher government, which is the main reason for the present weakness of the unions. Recognising this gives grounds for a quite different strategy from that advocated by Bassett, at the heart of which is the campaign for the election of a Labour government.

Disorganised Capitalism

The enclosed poem is inspired by John Urry's article (*MT* October) on the theme of 'Disorganised Capitalism' and echoes a famous poem by Hugh MacDiarmid.

*Fragmenting the word
processor,
forty-two micro chips flew back
centrifugally to
productive units,
stain-glassed,
stainless-steeled,
state-sponsored,
state of the art,
air tight and air conditioned
in arid Texas*

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Street. London EC1M 4AY. Brevity means you are more likely to be published. We reserve the right to cut. •

Wasn't the reason for the creation of the Labour Party at the beginning of the century to get a fairer industrial relations environment for unions and workers? Today that needs to be given an equally high priority.

All this is not to minimise Bassett's very powerful case for unions to be more responsive to their members' individual needs. Anyone looking towards a more democratic society in the future will envisage unions playing a substantial role in the provision of facilities such as holidays, leisure and culture. Surely we will not set lower aims for them.

But that will be in addition to, and not as an alternative to, their central role in looking after wages and conditions at the workplace. 9

Jock Nicolson, London

*and fast food California,
in Denmark and
technical Germany,
in Japan, frantic Taiwan
and Singapore,
even cow dung,
green field west Cork:
a telecommunicated
disassembling journey
over one million miles
from the static
point of the final plastic clip
but perfect like the
transparent bubble
behind the bleached
gull's skull
that fixed the tilt of the wings,
without apparent effort
or studied plan.
Francis Devine, Dublin*



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