

Future Of Welfare Contract

'The problem of the nature and extent of the provision to be made for old age is the most important, and in some ways the most difficult, of all the problems of social security.' This is not an extract from Paul Johnson's pessimistic peer into the future (*MT* January), but from Beveridge's 1942 report on social insurance.

Beveridge too was alarmed at the low birth rates and growing proportions of pensioners. But his assumptions about the increases in the elderly population failed to anticipate the postwar 'baby boom'.

Johnson is probably right on the demography. However, he is surely wrong in his analysis, and repeated 'problem' orientation. The ageing of the population will have profound effects. But this is a challenge and a triumph of improved living standards, rather than a cause for so much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The major problem which Johnson foresees concerns the future of the welfare contract. How can a growing pool of economically-inactive elderly people be sustained? It is, he suggests, 'inevitable that the interaction of current demographic trends and current welfare policies will impose a large, growing and possibly unsustainable fiscal burden on the productive populations.' The ratio of national insurance contributors to pensioners is cited (expected to fall from a

current 2.3:1 to 1.6:1 by the 2030s). This, concludes Johnson, implies an increase in national insurance contributions from 12.5% of the wage bill to 18%. But in an increasingly technological society does it really make sense to view the number of employees as the only indicator of wealth generation? Industries which are less labour than silicon-intensive are nonetheless achieving economic growth and productivity. This underlines the need for society to view the challenge of demographic change collectively.

Another approach to the problem of a shrinking workforce, Johnson claims, 'is to attempt to raise the domestic fertility rate.' While there are arguments in favour of compensating women for their opportunity-costs incurred in childbirth and family-raising, and for providing childcare facilities, these are not generally pro-natalist arguments. Even if they were, should purely material considerations be encouraged in a society which doesn't value children as citizens?

Paul Johnson is right on one thing: the issues which will arise in 30 or so years, require urgent and considered action. The short time-horizon of all governments is not helpful, but the challenges of today will become the crises of tomorrow without clear and deliberate strategies now. •
Melanie Henwood, London

Singular Pact

Tricia Davis and David Green deserve thanks for laying out (*MT*, February) the arguments for an electoral alliance to oust Thatcher and introduce PR.

The issue of principle in the present discussion is not electoral pacts but the means of effecting a long-overdue constitutional reform which the CP has supported for over 40 years, albeit with insufficient enthusiasm.

This is an essentially democratic project. If the opposition parties could agree to suspend their differences on other issues for a single election to a short parliament, they could doubtless agree also on a limited platform of short-term policies designed to bring the wildest excesses of Thatcherism to a halt. If the project

succeeded, they could then fight the immediately ensuing PR election on their own policies.

Given the widespread support for PR among the other opposition parties, the problem becomes one of convincing the Labour Party of its need for this reform. The biggest objection will be that PR offers the almost certain prospect of coalition government for years to come. But given the balance of class forces, a majority of seats based on a minority of votes is an inadequate foundation for carrying through a socialist programme. The minimum condition is a majority of the popular vote: no more difficult to achieve under PR than under the present system. •
Steve Ruhemann, Bingley

Robotisation

Paul Johnson (*MT* January) in 'Old Age Creeps Up' loses sight of two central matters of principle. He appears to be assuming that present human population densities are not excessive, but rather less than is 'necessary' in order to 'pay for' inevitable population ageing. But it is generally accepted that excessive population densities are the main cause of the ecological catastrophe towards which we are now heading.

A main consequence of industrial revolution has been a world population increasing to several times the natural carrying capacity of the environment. Unless serious measures are taken to halt or even reverse this population growth, world population will double again in the next one or two generations.

Certainly more effective technical measures could alleviate the environmental

problems due to overpopulation. But are our children going to thank us for a world onto which modern technology has been used to squeeze the maximum possible number of bodies? Paul has overlooked the principle of materialist biology: that 'there is nothing an animal can do that a machine could not be designed to do'. If true, this seems to imply the possibility of complete robotisation of industrial production. Robotisation is already becoming a major factor in the evolution of society.

Robotisation implies the absence of any real limit to the wealth per person possible, for world populations of, say, a fifth of what they now are. Keeping such reduced populations in comfortable leisure (including space for some of the vast forests lost in the last century, restored to their former glory?), should no longer be a problem. O

Frank Quelon, Dyfed

Grand Hotel Abyss

I enjoyed reading Dick Hebdige's article on postmodernism (*MT* January) and I was interested to see him refer to the 'chilly extremism' of Baudrillard. This seems to me an apt phrase, although I would go further and say 'cynical' and 'irresponsible' as well. Witness the following statement from *The Ecstasy Of Communication*: 'Let us be stoics: if the world is fatal, let us be more fatal than it. If it is indifferent, let us be more indifferent. We must conquer the world and seduce it through an indifference that is at least equal to the world's.'

It is comforting for a Western intellectual, such as Baudrillard, to be able to adopt this 'stoical' attitude, but it is a position which is not available to those who are at the receiving end of exploitation in the 'post-modern' world, especially

those in the Third World who are the very real victims of that American capitalism whose 'energy' Baudrillard seems so keen to celebrate.

Georg Lukacs once referred to Adorno as having 'taken up residence in the "Grand Hotel Abyss" - a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity', where 'the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.'

This description was unfair to Adorno, but it is perfectly applicable to the position adopted by Baudrillard (witness the self-obsessed interview in the same issue of *Marxism Today*). If this is the 'high priest of postmodernism', then God help us all. O

Chris Pawling, Sheffield

People Before Profit

What courage to find marxism itself challenged in, of all publications, *Marxism Today*. Also helpful to read (*MT* January) an analysis of a post-modern marxist concept, 'the production of meaning', by Dick Hebdige. I'm not convinced though, that Dick's new symbolic 'Britishness' is anything more than enterprise punks on English postcards representing Britain's latest role in disorgan-

nised global capitalism.

Then again, maybe disorganised global capitalism can bring about changes needed to end war, apartheid, poverty and pollution and develop individual freedoms and social democracy in a better way than organised communism. People before capital and political profit?

Food for the sort of new times thinking that Gorbachev and colleagues are not afraid of. •
MJ Weller, London

Sacrificing Women

I wish Suzanne Moore and Stephen Johnstone (*MT* Jan) had managed to get Jean Baudrillard to describe in more detail his image of sacrificing a woman in the desert. Could the woman be Mrs Thatcher, Princess Di or Nancy Reagan? Could she be a 'bag-lady' or somebody terminally ill? How would she be earning her living? Would she be a mother or a grandmother? Would she have volunteered to be sacrificed? Or would she have been paid or kidnapped? Would she be African, Asian, American, Middle Eastern or European? And how would she be sacrificed? With his own bare hands? A ritualistic dagger? Or with the help of professional killers and things? •

Fran Hazelton, London

Alliance of Predators

From the point of view of those who wish for a different society from the one the present government hopes to forge, the idea of an electoral pact (*MT* Feb), as against an alignment of the Left, seems a great one-off fix, whereupon the luscious fraternal fighting can break out again after victory - or defeat.

There is no moral basis for any sort of electoral pact if it's solely designed to defeat the present government. It would be an alliance of predators rather than of policy. I speak with some legitimacy because I was one of the 20 or so Liberals who voted against a merger with the SDP, not seeing how we could present a national

Nan's Best Friend

Jeremy Cherfas and his friend, Sam, have got it quite wrong (*MT* February). Man's best friend is this woman's serious environmental hazard.

Five and a half years of push-chair-wheeling has taught me a lot about dogs and their owners and none of it seems to be pleasant. Most of what I know sticks to wheels and then to the carpets of our house. Parks are foul and our bin-bags ripped to shreds. One of my children had an ice-cream taken out of his hand and the other has been bitten. We are woken by our neighbour's howling beast and have to clear his droppings from our steps.

This in itself is all quite enough, but the problem has a more serious dimension. At

Entertaining Information

Still shivering after being introduced to the 80s 'hyper-reality' (*MT* January) and the observation that 'competition at the bottom end of the tabloid market has led editors to abandon the distinction between entertainment and information', I opened *The Guardian* (Jan 6, 1989) and read its piece on the downing of two Libyan jets. This erudite and serious appraisal titled 'Ace Pilots Gun Their Way Into Roll Of War Heroes', informed me that 'the battle ... was more akin to a game of playground tag ... than films such as Richard Gere's *An Officer And A Gentleman* and Tom Cruise's *Top Gun*'. What price 'Libyans Eat Alien' next? •

Paul Walker, Cleveland

programme to the voters when Dr Owen was determined to carry his quite different defence policy into the new entity.

I do not see how the SLD could forge a fully-fledged electoral pact with Dr Owen's SDP. It is not even clear - even to radical Liberals like me - that the SLD has more in common in political (versus emotional) terms with Labour than with the wet wing of the Conservative Party.

Under these conditions, pacts can only come on the floor of the House of Commons after an election, and on specific legislation such as constitutional reform, housing, the environment or regional development. •

Lesley Abdela, Wiltshire

least a hundred children a year are blinded as a result of dog-borne parasites in the UK. The domestic dog is eating its way through enough protein to feed any number of malnourished third-world children and provides pet-food manufacturers with absolutely monstrous profits.

My children and I agree when we consider that the real problem is that people are anthropomorphising dogs, so giving them a consideration that isn't accorded to many humans. Dogs, it seems, have become status symbols for idiots and offer little in return (except for the very few) that wouldn't be better got by developing mature relationships with human beings. •

Jams Griffiths, Glamorgan

No Solutions

John Gribbin's piece on the 'greenhouse' effect (*MT* February) was trivial and disappointing. This environmental problem surely requires more serious consideration than a discussion of a reversal in the current position of the Soviet Union and the USA vis a vis grain production and consump-

Ritual Of The Gallows

Reg Kray's touching account of the last moments of Flossie Forsyth's life (*MT* February) did not mention that Forsyth met his death at the end of the rope only because the prosecution were able to prove that the unfortunate youth who was killed had been robbed.

At that time, 1959, murder was carefully packaged into categories, and two of the categories for which death by hanging was the punishment were the murder of a policeman or woman in the course of their duties and murder in pur-

tion. Gribbin was also guilty of the sin for which he condemned the government: talking about the problem without offering solutions. Not once in the whole article did he discuss the sort of measures that could be taken to reduce the severity of greenhouse warming, or, possibly, prevent it. •

Leslie Masters, Coventry

suance of theft. The evidence of robbery against Forsyth was very weak - but then when British justice is bent on retribution it does not have to be anything else.

After a long and hard battle, Sydney Silverman in 1965, with the aid of the Wilson government, achieved the passage of his Abolishment Of Capital Punishment Act. At last the horrible ritual of the gallows, the noose and the clergyman's incantations was over. But if the Blessed Margaret has her way it will be restored with all its gory detail. #

Sid Gregory, London

Footnotes

How are those among us who have not been to university in the last decade, and who are unfamiliar with the jargon of structuralism, to comprehend the marxist debate in your magazine? I must be one of many who, unable to 'deconstruct' your articles, will buy a less elitist rag. •

Josie Harmin, Cleveland

Thank you for printing the excellent article by Goran Ther-

born (*MT* February) which presented the modern argument for political and economic change with laser-sharp clarity.

At the risk of environmental damage, I suggest the article be put in leaflet form and air-dropped to every inhabitant of the planet. O

Dan Rubinstein, London

Post-Marxism Today?! •
*Richard Ingram,
Wolverhampton*

Editorial Note: we welcome your letters to add to discussion. Please send them to *MT* Letters Page, 16 St John

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

