

Fax To The Future

Globalisation is set to transform the nature of community. **Dick Hebdige** suggests what cultural politics might look like in the 90s



Ski-break and health-spa takings were down in the Urals in 1998 after the White Wolves of Christendom, a right-wing Ukrainian paramilitary organisation, launched a missile attack on the Kerenskygrad Holiday Inn, before taking a group of visiting executives from the Disney Corporation hostage. A communique issued by the terrorists claimed that the captured businessmen - in Russia to discuss the siting of the proposed multi-million euromark Winter Palace World leisure complex - were working for the SIA (Sony Intelligence Agency) to 'undermine the spiritual revival of the Fatherland'. A denial was issued in a satellite news statement transmitted from SIA headquarters in Tokington, Kure Island, midway between Tokyo and Washington and President (Michael) Jackson of the Pacific Federation reaffirmed PF commitment to the Sinatra Doctrine embodied in the GMCD (Global Maintenance of Cultural Diversity) Accord signed in California last June on the fifth anniversary of the formal dissolution of Nato and the Warsaw Pact.



requires us to be alert not just to potential lines of connection and alliance but to discontinuity and difference.

Confronting globalisation doesn't mean re-running debates on mass versus popular or folk culture. It's not just a question of identifying the spread of 'Americanised' cultural styles and forms and arguing over their significance. It means acknowledging the extent to which a fundamental restructuring in strategies for capital accumulation has made questions of cultural value figure more and more centrally in calculations concerning investment, corporate growth and profitability. From spiralling prices on the international art market to the legitimisation of consumer culture even in the Eastern bloc and the role of PR and image in hyping everything from global brands to green issues and government policies, all the evidence points to the collapse of any firm line between 'culture' and 'commerce'.

Confronting globalisation means recognising, after a year which ended with a historic superpower summit disrupted by the weather, that the global balance of forces and the emergence of a new world order will require an imaginative response to environmental as well as geo-political pressures and changes. After a decade of ecological disasters in which more and more rusty links were discovered in the food chain and more and more 'natural resources' were privatised, the very existence and survival of a pure realm called 'nature' outside 'culture' is in serious doubt.

The scale and urgency of these problems demands a new approach to cultural politics. Confronting globalisation means coming to terms with our own necessary provincialism without either surrendering to it or losing sight of what might be possible beyond the relatively narrow worlds we inhabit. It means there can be no return to the monolithic masculinism of the old heroic narratives of Socialist Man.

But it doesn't licence a retreat into the ghetto of 'oppositional' identities either. It won't be enough in the 90s merely to assert sexual, class, age, ethnic or regional differences against Thatcherite constructions of uptight little England. Regional preoccupations with European identity in the wake of the crisis in the Soviet bloc place the break-up of Britain and Britishness in a context where the word 'post-colonial' takes on wider and more complex resonances. And at another level it is becoming increasingly clear that a tactic of simple resistance to 'dominant discourses' is inadequate insofar as it threatens to leave the Left trapped in a narrow frame of a decaying Thatcherite formation. Strategies of reaction and retrospective analysis of the latest 'crisis' or 'disaster' - even those vivid, lyrical critiques of Britishness produced in the vibrant video and film sectors - tend to concede too much ground to the initiatives of a militant and modernising Right

'Today, in politics as in love, passionate affairs can be conducted at a distance'



After the 80s and especially after 1989 anything seems possible. And while it's clear that 'we have no crystal balls' as Mrs Thatcher kept putting it in her *Panorama* interview last November, it may well be that science fiction will provide a more accurate way of predicting the pace and shape of political and cultural developments in the next decade than sober analysis built on the careful consideration of historical precedents.

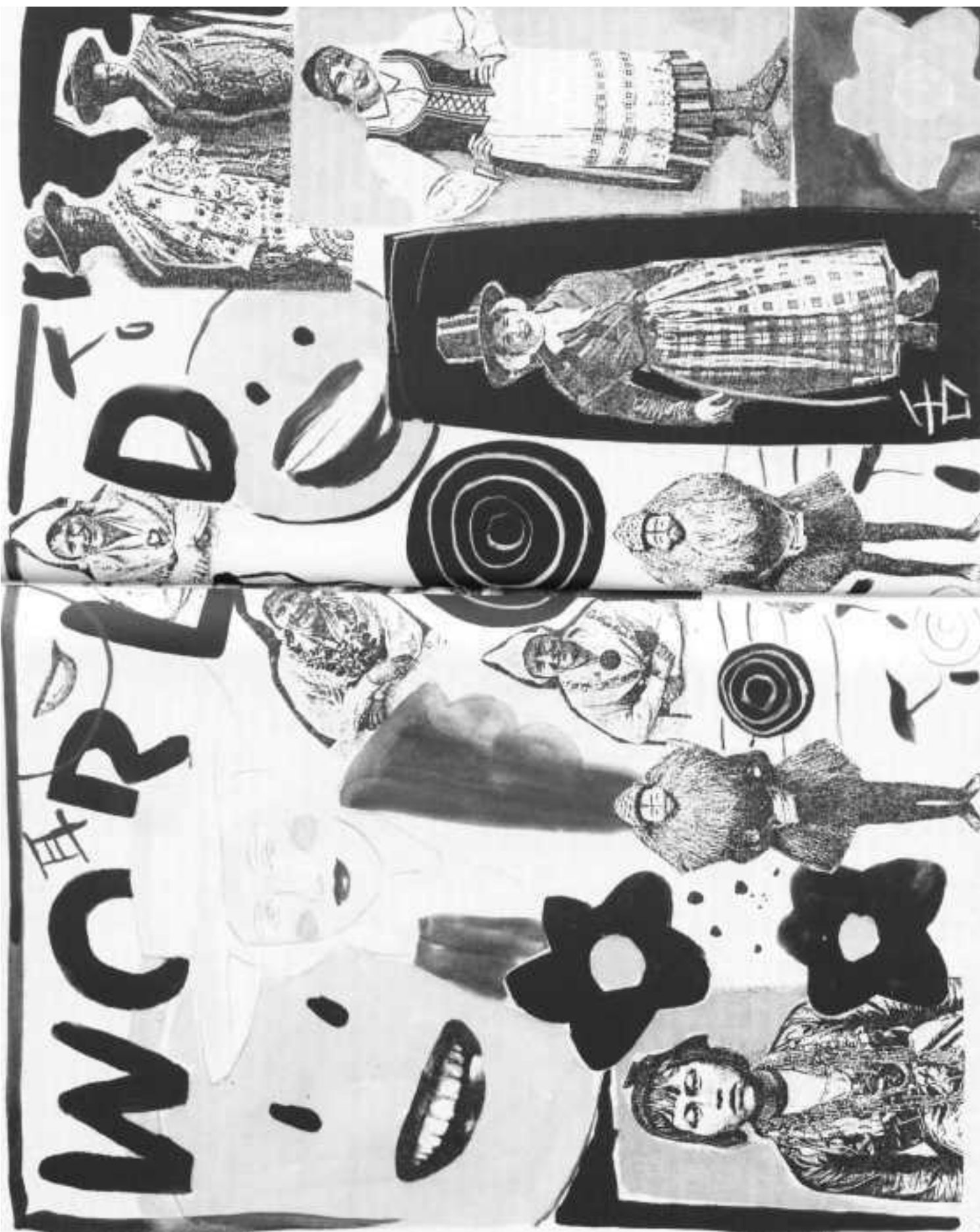
Who would have guessed a year ago that Richard Branson, already invited on to the board of the Intourist travel agency, would be planning a Virgin megastore in Moscow, using projected rouble profits to buy fuel for Virgin Airlines routed across Russian airspace? Or that 150m Russian tv viewers would be watching contestants competing for

prizes of Japanese electronic goods in a quiz show based on the American board game *Trivial Pursuit* against a backdrop of advertising logos for Pepsi Cola?

As well as reflecting and reacting to events in the 'real world', television is itself acting as a leading protagonist in the international drama of falling walls and frantic capital, image and information flows which is currently creating a global culture.

With the 90s now upon us, it's becoming increasingly clear that the terms in which we think about culture, political action and historical change will have to be subjected once again to critical review. Analytical frameworks will have to address questions which have ramifications across multiple, disparate contexts - contexts which can't be simply added-up to produce a totality in the old sense. Thinking in a global frame today

Illustration: Beverley Layt



intent on making the world over in its own image while leaving the 'margins' and the inner cities to get on with it.

All these conflicting pressures and demands require us to look again at the limitations as well as the strengths of certain cherished models of cultural struggle, cultural identity and community. Since the late-50s 'culture' has been something of a keyword for the Left and 'cultural politics' has been the rubric under which many of the 'new' movements have subsequently organised. There is much of lasting value to be retained from the insights offered in that moment. It is still worth saying that culture is not reducible to Culture; that culture is not *just* about art, music, literature, however 'timeless' the art, however 'right on' the literature; that it is not about the selective myths of 'tradition' and 'heritage' which happen to be favoured by those who - in whatever context and for whatever reason - are in power. It is still worth saying that culture is, as Raymond Williams put it, 'ordinary', that it encompasses all the diverse means by which people are shaped and in turn *give shape* to their lived experience.

But meanwhile much has changed and some of the sedimented notions of 'community' and 'identity' which have grown up round existing models of cultural politics do need re-examining. One legacy of the emphasis on the 'organic' links between class or race and culture is that there is a tendency to think of cultures 'belonging' by 'birthright' to particular communities bound together through the sanctity of *place*. It's usually through the metaphor of roots that this connection to 'home' as point of origin is imagined. The notion of the 'good' or authentic community (as opposed to inauthentic or imaginary communities like the nation) has been applied on the left to other less-geographically bounded political and cultural communities of interest, based round sexual preference, religious belief and so on.

In all these applications there is a tendency for rooted communities to be represented as homogeneous. For all practical political purposes, the members of a rooted community when functioning as a community are envisaged as the same - equal, interchangeable. Once rooted, communities have to defend themselves against those forces which by working towards dispersal and/or internal differentiation of community members threaten the community with extinction. The threatening forces can range from the upheavals wrought by 'nomad capital' through the seductions of consumer goods to dilution through miscegenation and mixed-race adoptions, depending on which community is 'under siege'.

The tendency to isolate, idealise and homogenise communities is matched by the assertion of the integrity and 'purity' of cultural traditions. Cosmopolitan-

ism - the register in which the 'globalisation' of culture is today represented - is regarded as the inauthentic Other to all that is 'local', 'lived' hence 'real'.

Clearly either/or oppositions of this kind aren't adequate to the complex challenges of life in the 90s. The values and meanings attached to place and homeland remain as charged as ever but the networks in which people are caught up extend far beyond the neighbourhoods in which they're physically located or the alliances to which they are consciously committed.

Some of these 'imaginary communities' are the products of specific histories. The forcible migration, enslavement or containment of populations from both Africa and Europe, for instance, has created transnational identity networks that are now primed to explode. Diasporic identities can link an unemployed youth in Johannesburg to a bank clerk in Brixton, or a secretary in Brooklyn to a complex web of sympathies and solidarities, while the resurgent diasporas of central and Eastern Europe threaten not only the survival of the East-West German border but the integrity of the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Peasant nationalisms notwithstanding, the nation-state really is beginning to look both too small and too big to accommodate the contradictory forces that are shaping global culture in the 90s.

At another level, while post-modern descriptions of space-time 'compression' or 'implosion' may seem overdrawn, it's clear that we're living in a world where 'mundane' cosmopolitanism is part of 'ordinary' experience. All cultures, however remote temporally and geographically, are becoming accessible today as signs and/or commodities. If we don't choose to go and visit other cultures they come and visit us as images and information on tv, as snatches of world music or Italian opera heard on the radio, as Indian or Chinese takeaways. Nobody has to be 'design conscious', educated, well-off or adventurous to be a world traveller at this level. It's all part of the uneven experience of being 'taken for a ride' in and through late-20th century consumer culture. In the 1990s everybody - willingly or otherwise, whether consciously or not - is more or less cosmopolitan.

As diversification, flexible accumulation and retail-sensitive production and distribution systems combine with merger mania to produce truly mega-conglomerates targeting standard products at 'global segments' we find ourselves caught up in what Kevin Robins calls a 'new global-local nexus' (*MT* Dec 1989). This new nexus is transforming centre-periphery relations culturally as well as economically and in the process the old 'progressive' maps of cultural development are getting torn to pieces.

One of the tragic implications of the Rush-

die affair, for instance, is that rather than being a simple clash of two opposing 'world views' - one provincial and fundamentalist, the other cosmopolitan and progressive - the terms of the oppositions keep getting turned around. 'Magic realism' and the separation of art and the artist from moral and political accountability stand revealed as part of a distinctly Western modernist tradition - that is, in a global context as *provincial* - despite the universal claims made on behalf of that tradition. That provincialism in turn was exposed only through worldwide distribution of *The Satanic Verses*. Meanwhile many Bengali immigrants in Spitalfields or Bradford, 'Shia Muslims in Sunni societies, Turkish guest-workers in Sweden, Palestinians in Detroit,' to quote one commentator on the affair, are 'proletarian cosmopolitans, cosmopolitans in spite of themselves', who clearly do not find themselves represented in the secular 'literature of exile' and react accordingly. Conflicts and reversals of this kind will become more frequent in the 90s as cultures go global, producing reactions and effects unforeseen by the globalising agencies. An example of the problems that can arise from trying to address the whole world simultaneously can be found in the recent Benetton ads, where provocative black-and-white images designed to take the Family-of-Man 'United Colours' campaign 'one step further' provoked bomb attacks from racist groups in France and negative reactions from black consumers everywhere. No universal code of communicative etiquette or ethics is likely to be framed in the foreseeable future to prevent this kind of clash or to arbitrate between the warring interests.

The new global-local nexus forces us to develop more mobile and less rooted models of community and cultural identity. It means accepting looser definitions of commitment. A revised perspective may lead us to question distinctions between 'serious' and 'superficial' struggles which were taken for granted in the past.

Take for instance the miners' strike and the recent Acid-House panic. Ostensibly the two phenomena are worlds apart. The miners' strike was fought and lost around the defence of long-established communities and forms of labour rooted in particular localities and loyalties. All of this was embodied in a specific occupational culture. That culture revolved around a particular sexual division of labour which *incidentally* was transformed in the course of the strike as the women found their power. Acid House is non-exclusive, placeless and lays no obligations on those who participate. It's to do with pleasure, leisure, the right to dance not work, though work remains significant insofar as the people who take part need money to spend on tickets, refreshment, petrol, phonecalls. And yet one of the issues raised in the miners' strike and Acid House is mobility as right: the right to use the motorways to join a

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picket line or to empty your pocket having a good time.

The fact that one struggle revolved around the defence by thousands of workers of sedimented communities, modes of work and associated forms of political organisation; and the other around the assertion by thousands of consumers from all over the place of the right to converge for an evening on one place, have some fun dancing to rhythmic electronic music pasted together from disparate sources through a technique called 'sampling' and then disperse, doesn't prevent both struggles being in different ways about *the right to community* and free association, the right of people to congregate *en masse* and to act in concert to achieve a common purpose.

The first struggle was fought as a matter of life and death. It involved the protection of livelihood and birthright and revolved around the defence of forms of identity and community that were literally and historically *embedded*. The second is about communion and crowds, pleasure and the body. It is 'grounded' in the airwaves, carried on the phone lines and involves forms of association that are casual, informal and transitory. But none of these differences should be allowed to obscure the fact that both are struggles and both are simultaneously political *and* cultural.

Mass participation in events like Acid-House gatherings at a time when mass political movements in the West are in decline is a coincidence significant in itself. In the face of Thatcher's rejection of 'society', the need to belong to a collective, to feel connected to energies that exceed and transform those available to the individual and his or her immediate circle, has continued undiminished. Live Aid, Sport Aid, the city marathons, Acid-House parties and, more poignantly, Hillsborough and the massing of mourners at the ground in the aftermath of the tragedy, all testify to the endurance of the popular desire to commune directly or by proxy via tv or music with a crowd of other people.

But the forms in which this desire is expressed are often new. And the New Agitations of the 90s are likely to remain deeply contradictory. For instance Band-Aid style save-the-worldism, a mix of Christian-humanist and eco concerns, is undoubtedly a genuine, heartfelt response to global crisis. But as the international esperanto of pop music it also conveniently integrates 'natural' juvenile idealism, global music markets and the donation pound to magically resolve the problems facing both humanity and the big record companies.

A new bourgeois political style built on looser, less intense alliances of groups and individuals than the old protest formations can be seen in the growth of the green consumer lobby, ethical investment schemes, Charter 88 and Band-Aid style interventions. Politics here becomes something to be plugged into

'In the 1990s everybody, whether consciously or not, is more or less cosmopolitan'



Life And Times



Home Helps: The 1980s saw some new hi-tech consumer products take off: video recorders and cameras, compact-disc players, home computers, microwave ovens and a few more. And the gradual incorporation of micro-electronics into many familiar technologies, from cars and cookers to tvs and washing machines, in the form of new electronic controls, displays and the like.

If the current development efforts of manufacturers are anything to go by, the 90s will see intensification of both trends. Among new products are systems that bring together compact-disc and computer power. These enable the rapid recall and processing of large volumes of data: hi-fi sound, images, text and even (though limited) video. Proposed uses include: educational aids, video games, in-car route-finding and map display, 'elastic music' and many more.

Another new product, the subject of bitter international competition over standards, is high-definition tv, which offers wide-screen, brilliant quality pictures. Truly mobile communications - new cellular telephone systems at prices consumers can afford - are also just around the corner.

And increasingly powerful micro-electronics will be incorporated into familiar household goods. Some of this will be gimmicky (digital clocks on everything) and some more functional (greater energy conservation). One important possibility which this opens up is to link together different parts of the house in 'home networks'. Since more and more equipment is gaining the power to process digital information it is possible to pass this data around. Competition is hotting up as to which version of the 'smart house' will be successful.

The fully-fledged 'smart house' will probably only become commonplace well into the next century. But expect to see goods marketed as being able to form part of interactive home systems, with the advantages of being accessible to remote control and monitoring and so on. The next 10 years will see the beginning of the battle over the 'home of the future'.

Ian Miles



The Way To Work: The engineering unions' campaign to win a shorter working week is

just one of the pressures forcing employers to consider reorganising working time to do away with the standard five-day working week.

Since the early 1980s the most dramatic change in working time has been the strong growth in overtime. Almost half the manual workforce in manufacturing does not work a standard five-day week of eight-hour days.

In the long run, the growth of part-time work in the service sectors will be the most powerful force undermining the traditional working week. Employers seeking to recruit women to make up for the decline in the number of young people are likely to introduce innovative shift patterns to accommodate the demands of domestic work. These could include term-time working, special evening shifts, career breaks and more home-working.

In some industries, such as tv and the prison service, endemically-high overtime has persuaded employers to restructure working time quite radically. For instance at Independent Television News contracts of employment specify a fixed number of hours which staff should work annually, rather than per week.

Many manufacturing companies are likely to change shift patterns to make more intensive use of capital equipment. The pressure is spreading from the coal industry - where local agreements on weekend working are now common - into the car industry. Manufacturers contemplating major investments are increasingly likely to press for 24-hour production to minimise the amount of time machinery is left idle.

Finally service-sector companies are altering working time to fit in with the needs of consumers and customers. Long opening hours at supermarkets, to accommodate late-night shoppers, are being followed by the banks. British Gas and Telecom are pressing for maintenance engineers to do more work early in the mornings or in the evenings so that they can call on customers without requiring them to take time off work.

Charlie Leadbeater

and pulled out of in gestures like November's 'fax for freedom', in which Tiananmen Square exiles liaised with *The Face* and 15 other magazines in countries as far apart as Finland and Brazil. Readers were urged, with the slogan, 'You have the technology to affect history', to send a statement prepared by the students to a selection of 16,000 published Chinese fax numbers. Soldiers from the People's Army have been posted to stand guard over every fax machine in China as the international brigades of the 1990s march down the phone lines.

With the decline of class and nation as imaginary points of identification for mobilising the masses, these initiatives represent attempts to invent collectives less personally involving and familial than the 'brotherhoods' and 'sisterhoods' of the last three decades. What's new about the new political forms is the speed and scale of the operations involved, the often indirect nature of 'participation', the limitation of means and objectives, use of PR, marketing and electronic communication systems to both publicise and realise the projects and the acknowledgment of, and respect for, difference within the collective. This is politics in the age of Aids; today, in politics as in love, passionate affairs can be conducted at a distance.

As the me-decade recedes into the collective memory, a new emphasis is being placed in the media on the values of caring, communing and connecting, as public perceptions of the ecological crisis and the new geo-political cartographies enforce new patterns of interdependence - a we-awareness - on us all. The race is on to articulate the social forces that are now emerging to radically-opposed political projects. Douglas Hurd urges a return to 'the traditional Tory values' of 'civic responsibility' and a 'concern for the quality of life'. Meanwhile Gorbachev takes religion off the dangerous drugs list in his meetings with the Pope and appeals to the idea of a 'European homeland'.

Everywhere, from new times to New Age, from alternative medicine to the new physics, attempts are being made to broaden the parameters within which change can be understood and effected. What is at stake in the 90s is nothing less than the reinvention of the social without the aid of a map, without the comfort of secure positions or familiar tools. Such a challenge requires us to be alert above all else to contradictions imagined not as knots to be untied by history or analysis so much as limits to be recognised, chances to be seized. To move beyond these islands in the 90s, to imagine what it means to operate inside a truly global frame we may have to learn to be a bit more *worldly* in our thinking.

1 Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appaduri in *Public Culture*, vol 1 no 2 Spring 1989 (University of Pennsylvania)

Life And Times



Flexible Friends: In a few short years the use of plastic money has transformed our attitudes to spending.

The plastic revolution is not simply confined to the privileged; the less-affluent increasingly opt for pre-paid plastic to feed the electricity meter or the telephone kiosk.

But plastic cards are simply spearheading the inevitable drift towards the cashless 90s, in which different and more sophisticated forms of payment will gradually replace money, and fundamentally transform relationships between buyers and sellers.

Cashless shopping creates its own small, protected economies. Retailers use store cards to build customer loyalty and record who buys what, when, where and how frequently. A computerised list of itemised purchases turns the customer into raw marketing material, to be ruthlessly tracked, targeted and mailed.

Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale, affectionately known as EFTPoS, will enable the customer to pay for goods with a plastic card and Personal Identification Number (PIN) at the till, automatically debiting the amount from his or her bank account.

Retailers hope this will reduce the cost of handling cash and cheques, and improve cash flow by instantaneous payment. But for consumers the benefits are ambiguous. Not having to carry cash, quicker service at tills and improved security may be outweighed by creeping corporate surveillance of individual lifestyles on a scale that Special Branch can only fantasise about.

Nevertheless, there are progressive possibilities in the cashless future. Increasingly local councils are looking to plastic cards to provide services more efficiently and cheaply to greater numbers of people. For example, pre-paid cards could be used by priority groups to purchase locally-provided leisure or meal services at different levels of subsidy. Or to provide 'free credits' for those most in need.

This use also opens the way for a greater sensitivity to particular needs or changing tastes. Just as Marks & Spencer

uses its store card to tailor offers to particular segments of the market, information-rich council cards could help the public sector respond to its customers' needs. Might the plastic card of the 1990s be the site where marketing and socialism are finally reconciled?

Julie Sheppard



Hard To Stomach: The 1980s brought the postwar wave of popular concern over all aspects

of food production. It was the decade when vegetarianism and organic produce were in, and fats, additives and eggs were out.

The new decade will bring further rounds of conflict. Firstly, the European Community harmonisation of food standards continues apace. It is of course possible that EC regulation will improve food quality, but many food analysts suspect otherwise.

Secondly, a new generation of food technologies - genetic engineering, 'natural' additives, irradiation, new low-fat calorie substitutes - will come on - stream, dragging in their wake the suspicions and calls for safeguards which a more aware public is now making.

Thirdly, as multinational control of the mainstream retail market becomes increasingly concentrated, we will see a new tier emerging: a welfare-dependent niche, serviced by voluntary and welfare agencies. Modelled on US schemes, the idea is that the voluntary sector distributes surplus food, both uncooked (eg. past sell-by date) and cooked, to the poor. The European Commission has already approved French and Belgian 'Restaurant of the Heart' surplus-food schemes.

But perhaps the biggest tussle will be over democracy: people's right to eat a decent amount and quality of food. In 1988 the UK minister of agriculture met the National Farmers' Union 37 times, the National Consumer Council twice, the London Food Commission once and Friends Of The Earth not at all. With momentous changes in European food policy the battle for public, health and environmental voices to be heard is on.

Tim Lang

'One of the issues raised in the miners' strike and Acid House is the right to use the motorways'

