Age-Old Arguments

Each new age throws up its own social conflicts. Here we predict some of the dilemmas which will excite passions and create controversy in the 90s.
Firstly, **Jane Falkingham** and **Paul Johnson** examine the new generation gap

After three decades dominated culturally by youth, prepare for the return of the ageing hippy. Britain's changing demographic structure will make the newly-wrinkled middle-aged the most powerful consumer group; highly desirable to employers and irresistible to marketers.

The Beatles generation looks well placed to capitalise on one of the less-explored demographic trends of the 1990s: the change in age profile of the workforce as the numbers of 15-25 year olds decline alongside the bulge in 50-60s. This shift in labour-market structure is one of the two major demographic trends of the 1990s. The other, and better-known, is the increasing proportion of pensioners and elderly. Their combined effects will have ramifications across virtually all areas of everyday life, health, welfare, employment and consumer demand.

If one were to label the popular cultural ethos of the last three decades, each could be seen to have been determined by successive postwar baby generations. The 60s had the Beatles and hippies, a function of the maturing of those late-40s' babies. The 70s was the era of glam-rock, punk and disco, all arising out of the coming-of-age of the second baby bulge in the late-50s to early-60s. This group has continued to exert the dominant force over the marketplace during the last 10 years. The 1980s was the decade of materialism and the rise of yuppies. In time they too will disappear into the black hole of domestic bliss.

But there is no large youth group coming from behind to replace them as the driving force of consumerism. Instead we will see the re-emergence of those ageing 60s' hippies in the marketplace. Their family responsibilities will largely be behind them, as will the high mortgage repayments. They will be at the peak of their earning power. Furthermore, people in this age group may experience a substantial increase in wealth, since the typical age of inheritance from parents is mid to late-50s.

This combination of high disposable income and fewer familial responsibilities may make the 1990s the decade once again of the 'Woodstock generation'. The booming teenage and young-adult market of the last two decades will be a thing of the past, replaced by people in later-middle age. There will be a restructuring of the age-profile of demand and the development of new niche markets.

Demographic forces will also be reflected in changes in labour-market supply. After two decades of general labour surplus, there is likely to be a reversal of labour-market conditions. There will be intense competition for skilled younger workers, and the perceived value of older workers will change, ascribing them greater status. This may result in new employment practices, with pressure on employers to reverse the widespread policy of promoting early retirement.

Already service-sector companies such as the Tesco supermarket chain are actively recruiting older people to fill the part-time and temporary vacancies formerly taken by juvenile or casual workers. The age structure of the labour force will also undoubtedly make the training and retraining of older workers more attractive, especially with new technology which does not need much physical agility. However, the retention of older employees may create tensions with up-and-coming younger workers. Career ladders may become top-heavy and promotion prospects blocked.

The third area of personal life where the force of demographic change will be felt is in health and welfare services. With the rising numbers of elderly, particularly those aged over 85, there will be increased competition for these services. Children and elderly people are the main consumers of such services and to some extent the rise in the number of older people will be offset by a decline in the number of children. But it is not that straightforward. While children under four on average cost the health service twice as much annually as an adult aged 16-64, people aged 65-74 cost four times as much and over-75s more than nine times as much.

Government policy increasingly emphasises care in the community in an attempt to reduce these costs. But most care at home is provided not by social services but by family and friends, and particularly by women aged 45-60. Increased tension may result as the relative size of the pool of potential carers shrinks. More women than ever will be active in the labour market and unwilling to face the triple burden of work, housewife and mother as well as carer.

Much of the solution to care and pension provision depends on political will. Accompanying the demographic shifts is a change in the composition of the electorate. At present people aged over 45 - those taken to have a vested interest in care and pensions - constitute approximately 47% of the electorate, and this figure is rising.

If the dominance of postwar babies in the consumer market is also reflected in the political market there may be changes to the current agenda. But the interests of the older worker may not coincide with those of the older pensioner. Redistribution of resources is necessary. The key question of the 90s is: to whom?

The car: Tarnished image

Driving Passion

That symbol of the modern and the young — the car — is set for a rougher ride in the 90s. **Jonathan Glancey** weighs the arguments and goes down fighting...

The car is an object of reverence, scorn and controversy. Detractors have nothing good to say for a form of transport that is fundamentally selfish, environmentally threatening, hostile to human and animal life and unkind to villages, towns and cities. Supporters cite the freedom of mobility the car offers, particularly to people living in those remote or rural communities poorly, if at all, served by public transport. They can also claim that the car offers security, particularly to women, in hostile cities.

But the car is liked, above all, because it is the realisation of a dream, the mechanical horse that offers freedom and fantasy to its owners. The car has never been a mere utility, although Henry Ford's Model T and the Boulanger-Lefebvre two-horse Citroen got close. Early cars were absurd means of getting very awkwardly from A to B, with no guarantee of getting back to A. The cars that huff, puff and expire on the annual London - to - Brighton run were contemporaries of magnificently-crafted and highly-reliable steam expresses that could run, even then, at 90mph. The car began life as a toy for the idle rich and despite what so many people have argued since, it remains a toy.

The car is also an escape, a retreat from the outside world. There is a real pleasure to be had sweeping along a well-engineered road in the svelte comfort of a well-engineered car cocooned from the outside world listening to a well-balanced stereo system playing music that you want to hear. There is a sensual pleasure to be had from guiding such a car quickly and safely. On top of this, the car is the most complex and sophisticated piece of engineering and design most people will ever own.

Given this mix of overt and subliminal pleasure, which political party is going to be the first to ban the car or even to restrict its movement, except in the densest city centre?

Attempts to ban the car can only make it more desirable. Deny cars the right to turn a wheel and they will still be objects of desire. You have only to look at the absured prices people are willing to pay: a Ferrari GTO sold to a Japanese businessman for £10m in November.

For their part, car manufacturers can claim that the motor industry provides employment for a large percentage of the world's working population. They can claim that cars are going green, that the fastest of all cars, such as the new Lotus Esprit Turbo, is, with its catalytic convenor, one of the least dirty cars ever to turn a wheel. They can claim, above all, that people want the car. But they used to want cigarettes, white bread, refined sugar. People used to believe that mercury would cure disease. But the car is more tenacious. It grips the imagination.

Even if cars were powered by steam or electricity, they would still be a nuisance. In the long run it might be possible to make the car redundant, but not to get rid of it altogether. If some future British government invested intelligently in the kind of comprehensive public transport network that Holland enjoys, the car would be used less and less for commuting. Hedgehogs, rabbits and fretting parents would be able to breathe more easily on weekdays at least.

But, on weekends the car would still be rolled out like some high-powered lawnmower or monumental shoulder-borne stereo: status symbols, adult toys rather than a serious means of getting about, tending the lawn or listening to music.

In the 1930s the British public enjoyed what was probably the finest and most comprehensive public transport networks in the world. The London Underground was considered one of the wonders of the modern world. Trains shattered speed records. Obscure villages were linked by rail to lonely mainline junctions where trains would stop to whisk one or two passengers up to town. But what did people want? They wanted scrappy little £100 Fords, Morrises and Austins, as much as East Germans want their smokey little Trabants and Indians their antique Hindustans. The car is both fact, dream and nightmare, as much a part of our subconscious as it is a part of everyday life. Now try and legislate it out of existence. •

Village Green

The great East-West divide is crumbling. But what of North and South? **Edward Mayo** assesses the global trends

Few in the poorer countries of the world will be sad to see the back of the 1980s. The United Nations' 'Third Development Decade', punctuated by famine and the debt crisis, was for most developing countries a case of one step forward and three steps back - a drastic reversal measured in human lives, literacy and health. Prospects for the South in the 1990s have helped to concentrate minds on the idea of development for self-reliance rather than development as dependence. As Trinidadian statesman Edwin Carrington put it, 'We do not want to be dragged in chains into the 21st century'.

The 1980s marked the premature

death of Willy Brandt's idea of a North-South dialogue, as the North remained more preoccupied with another compass, that of East and West. But at the end of the decade a new world vision has set in: the concept of the 'global village', with its concern for the global environment and, underpinned by new technology, the growth of truly global multinational companies geared to a world market.

It is the issue of how poorer countries fit into this 'global village' which will define the patterns and tensions of world development in the 1990s. How will the greening of the North affect the development of the South? And how can poorer countries respond to shifts in trade and technology?

The assumptions and agenda of the environmental movement have been shaped by its Western origins, with a concentration on the impact of the excesses of industrial development on the quality of life. But despite this, environmental issues will be as high on the agenda in the South as in the North over the 1990s. The poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America - particularly in the countryside - are directly reliant on their local environment for the basics of food, fuel, water, fodder. As the land, trees and water come under attack in areas such as the dry sweep of the Sahel in Africa or the tropical forest lands of Amazonia in Brazil, so the basis of their livelihood is destroyed.

But the greening of the North is also creating new problems in poor countries as manufacturers simply transfer the 'dirty' stages of production to those nations less able to regulate them. The first wave of toxic-waste exports to the South came when the USA tightened its domestic legislation, the second when the EC did the same. That such problems will grow in the early 1990s is fairly easy to predict as new green legislation is introduced in the EC and USA.

Environmental issues challenge the international priorities of both North and South, who stand alike to lose out from global environmental degradation. Ironically, the South may find itself with a new leverage in this emerging international agenda. The focus for such enhanced leverage will be certain as-yet undeveloped areas of rich natural resources (such as the Okavango Delta in Botswana): not because of their potential for economic exploitation, but because of their environmental value for preservation.

But this shift carries a dangerous underlying current: that debate will focus exclusively on the global management of natural resources, rather than crucial inequalities in the global share and use of those resources.

'Sustainable development' has become a convenient catchphrase to reconcile economic growth with resource-management. In poor countries the link is very strong, since the causes of local environmental degradation are closely linked (through inappropriate modernisation, inequalities in land and resource ownership, and wider issues of debt and unequal trade) to the causes of poverty itself. But the concept does not apply in the same way to rich countries. Arguably the only form of sustainable global development is one which tackles both underdevelopment in the South and overdevelopment in the North.

The second key aspect of the 'global village' for the South relates to international trade. While industrialised groups of nations look to maximise free trade by drawing together into blocs such as the European Community and the US/Canada free trade area, multinational companies are beginning to exploit global economies of scale in production and marketing. Business is declaring itself too big for the nation-state.
This recognition is now the paradigm within the current round of international trade talks. Due for completion by the end of 1990, these talks have the ambitious aim of establishing new rules for the coming decade in key areas of international economic relations such as financial services and investment.

Alongside this, governments of the North are keen to restrict access to crucial technological developments. The new biotechnologies, producing for example new seeds for food crops, could be of immense benefit to the poor in developing countries. Instead, research is aimed solely at meeting the needs of the corporations that control the technology. The EC is currently proposing a regulation to patent genetic materials in a move which would reinforce the control of a corporate oligopoly over the world's diverse genetic resources, located primarily in the South.

The new world of the 1990s will be no less harsh for developing countries than the 80s. The key change may be one of public consciousness. The vision of a fragile Earth is a vivid reminder of the links between the people who share it. Crises in the South, as riots in Venezuela last year showed, are gradually forcing a rethink in the political circles of the North. On that basis at least, the aspirations of the poor can rest with hope and dignity in their own hands and in the struggles of their women's organisations, peasant groups and trade unions.©

Creating Havoc

The human embryo is a powerfully emotive symbol. As reproductive technology advances, **Susan Himmelweit** explores the conflicts that lie ahead

Embryology: A family affair

In the 1980s, thousands of babies were born to women who might not otherwise have become mothers, as a result of in-vitro fertilisation. This technology, and other methods of 'artificially' overcoming infertility will undoubtedly become more widely used in the 1990s.

Reproductive technologies excite controversy far out of proportion to the extent of their use and demands for legislative controls have been heard throughout the last decade. However, it is only now that the first government-sponsored bill to regulate reproductive technologies has at last appeared.

The government has not made up its mind on the most controversial issue - embryo research - and has proposed that MPs be given a free vote between allowing experiments on embryos up to 14 days old banning all such experiements. Like politicians in many other countries, the government seems to fear that whichever position it takes, it can only lose votes. And it may be right because the argument about embryo research has been conducted along very similar lines to the abortion debate.

The opponents of research, in particular, want to elide the two issues, to say that there is no difference between a foetus growing inside a woman's body and an embryo growing in a laboratory. The anti-abortion lobby minimises the role of the mother, portraying a pregnant woman as just a receptacle, the 'maternal environment' of an 'unborn child'. However, only after implantation in a woman's body does an embryo have any chance of life. Whatever one might say about a pregnant woman's foetus, a laboratory-grown embryo in its motherless, non-implanted state cannot realistically be said to have any human potential.

Embryo research is a women's issue because the egg from which the embryo is formed has to come from a woman. Unlike the collection of sperm, to harvest human eggs requires surgery, often preceded by hormonal treatment. So donating eggs is not a minor undertaking for a woman and is usually only done in the course of other surgery: either sterilisation or the collection of eggs to be used in her own infertility treatment. Women in such circumstances may feel under pressure to 'donate' eggs, if their treatment appears in any way to be dependent upon the co-operation with research.

But the ultimate issue about embryo research concerns its aims, for some of the 'benefits' that research might bring are themselves questionable. In particular, is developing the ability to detect and determine more characteristics of an embryo a desirable aim? Currently, foetuses can be screened for certain genetic diseases and for sex, but the only 'remedy' is abortion. If more genetic characteristics were to become detectable and/or could be inserted into embryos, then it would be technically possible for parents to choose characteristics of their future children before implantation.

But it would mean using in-vitro fertilisation, which currently has such a low overall success rate that only the risk of debilitating genetic diseases would make its use as a screening device worthwhile. Yet it is not entirely fanciful to imagine that its success rate could be improved, as well as our ability to read the genetic code. In that instance, albeit at considerable cost and inconvenience, parents could in theory choose the genetic characteristics of their children. The social consequences of this would be enormous and once such knowledge was available it would be impossible for legislation to prevent its application.

This - not debates about the exact moment when life begins - is the real issue about embryo research. Such dilemmas are of course not unique to reproductive technology: other types of research have the potential to force great changes on society. None, however, seem to invite such impassioned argument as reproductive research, involving as it does intervention and the use of scientific rationality in an area of our lives which has traditionally been seen as private and spontaneous. It seems, thereby, to raise fears of a much greater depth than can be explained by the actual or potential uses of the research itself.

Underlying these fears is a general distrust of the idea of interfering with natural family relationships. One effect of seeing existing relations of reproduction as 'natural' is to make the biological links between parents and children seem essential. If these were changed might not the whole structure of the family come tumbling down?

These worries have their origins in numerically much more significant changes than the use of reproductive technology. Single parenthood and marital breakdown have resulted in huge numbers of children being brought up in households with a 'parent' to whom they are not biologically related. This, rather than the birth of a few 'test-tube' babies, underlies traditionalist claims that changes in 'natural' family relationships should be controlled.

From a progressive point of view one of the benefits of the debates around reproductive technologies is to show that it is possible to split biological and social parenting roles, and that there is nothing natural about current reproductive arrangements. The traditional nuclear family remains a fundamental unit of our society. But that same family also produces relations between husbands and wives and between parents and children that are oppressive to both women and children. New reproductive techniques may help more couples to become 'proper' families, while at the same time challenging the views upon which the traditional family rests. •