

Dark Side Of The Decade

**Egoism may give way
to altruism, but Geoff
Mulgan sees a dull 90s
dominated by limits and
constraints**

The end of the 1980s feels like the end of an era. The dominant images, from across Eastern Europe, are ones of liberation. In the West too, the tide seems to have turned. An old conservative order is breaking down.

Nobody yet knows what new order will emerge, or what pains the transition will bring. It's a vain and hazardous task trying to predict a new decade especially one like this. But something of the tone of the 1990s is already clear.

I want to address two themes. The first runs directly counter to the heady scenes of liberation. It is about limits and disciplines, the ways in which rules and responsibilities weigh down on people. It is about the spread of disciplines across the world, and about how they are being joined by new ones. The second theme concerns religion, a set of rules in itself, but also a way of escaping from the constraints of everyday life. It is about why religion will be even more important in the 1990s, about its resilience and its ability to reach the parts that orthodox political movements cannot.

The 1990s come at the end of an extraordinary and perilous century. During it people discovered not only how to obliterate life but also how to control it, with everything from penicillin to cloning. During it industrial civilisation spread right across the globe and into

everything from war and education to pleasure. The story of the century is that of the spread of systems with ever-more complex controls, of institutions and machines, exerting power over nature and over society, gradually reaching into every pore of life.

The beginning of the 1990s comes at a crucial juncture in this story. The green movement reflects for the first time a truly widespread and focused unease with the promise of industry and technology. For the first time what Kundera called the 'collaborators with modernity' are on the defensive. Yet the 1990s also seem likely to bring a continued spread of the very same markets and firms that brought about the crisis.

The apparent paradox can be partially understood as an effect of changing ideas about control. During the course of the 1980s, the industrialised world built up an extraordinary obsession with control, visible on every high street and in every magazine. In business and organisations there is a fanatical interest in the tight surveillance of every transaction and every decision (which must be monitored, assessed and reassessed). In daily life there is the cult of control over the body and over health (the proliferation of sports centres, health centres, fitness programmes). There is a cult of the discipline needed for work - smart dressing, good presentation, timekeeping, dynamism.

All have a common theme. All are about pressures to increase productivity, only now productivity applies as much to leisure as it does to the office or factory. All are about controlling life (with the filofax, the Psion organiser...) to get more out of it.

For the 1990s there is a new set of rules, what we could call the green disciplines. The problem now is to control industrial capitalism. The global control of the greenhouse combines with a chain of disciplines that must pass right down the line from the UN, the EC, through national governments to the general public. For the individual, paranoia and guilt can now apply to every trip to the supermarket, every journey in a car. One of the great victories of the green movement has been to make everyone feel that even the most mundane action, like buying a bottle of washing-up liquid, involves a direct responsibility for the fate of the planet.

The same pressures are increasingly present at the international level. The free-market *Wall Street Journal* philosophy of gung-ho chaos, deregulation and greed being good has reached its limits. Instead we can now see that capitalism's other nature, its long drive towards greater control and predictability, has found a new outlet.

As transmuted into the real policies of governments and international organisations, greenness promises the global control of nature, of the seas and of the air. The old ecological argument - that the part cannot control the whole - is entirely lost. The sheer urgency of environmental solutions inevitably buttresses the system. After all, who but the powerful, the transnational companies, governments and international organisations, can really solve the environmental crisis? Their sheer logistical power becomes even more indispensable.

The redefinition of goals and priorities has echoed a marked political shift in the West. Most countries have begun to move beyond neo-conservatism towards a more controlled economy, a greater concern for quality and a more balanced growth.

For the Left the new disciplines and controls are double-edged. They mark the limits of the 1980s' libertarian new Right. And they are part of a larger historical process that has made the Left as conservative, and as concerned with bonds of social solidarity, as the Right. Responsibility has been placed firmly at the centre of the political agenda. Along with it comes care for everything, from the quality of trains and public spaces, to the quality of what a factory produces and the quality of life of others. Capitalism's greatest weakness is now seen to be its irresponsibility not, as in the past, its irrationality or unfairness. The 1980s stand to be condemned above all for the profound irresponsibility of the arms race, of unbridled free markets, and of the deregulation of everything from health



and safety to air traffic.

Global responsibility combines with a widespread acceptance of a stronger notion of individual responsibility. Society is no longer to blame either for the mugger or the insider-trader. On both left and right a permissive libertarianism is slipping: there is a sharper perception of just how much restraint, mutual respect and discipline is needed for diverse people to share the same social space. On both left and right theorists wring their hands about the need for moral bonds, for a real sense of citizenship, for a society that feels whole,

But if the 1990s are to be a decade of good citizenship then it has to be said that it remains unclear just how stable a more restrained and responsible culture will be. It certainly grates with a deep current of (sometimes bolshy) individualism that is particularly strong in the English-speaking world. Other questions are also unavoidable. Where will people find relief in the face of so many pressures? Will the controlled environments of homes, shops and work prove unbearably oppressive? Will the most privileged be those who can buy their way out of the limits, like the *jeunesse doree* of a previous age? Will there be pathological reactions (violence, hooliganism, hedonism, craven greed, or for that matter a truly fundamental religion) against the demands of good citizenship?

Television, which will rapidly expand in the 1990s while continuing to attract between a third and half of most people's free time, will both reflect and shape these conflicts. During the 1990s, for the first time, the dominant positions in society will be taken over by people brought up on television. Already it's possible to see people shaken free from the linear, consistent logics of a print culture. Instead there is the pick-and-mix of ideology, programme and belief. It is no longer possible to guess from one belief what other beliefs a person may have. Few now expect to have a fully-formed, comprehensive and consistent set of beliefs in the way that earlier generations did. The same may be true of political parties: witness the Spanish and New Zealand socialist parties, or for that matter the new parties of Eastern Europe, with their strange combinations of foreign, economic and social policy.

Television will also contribute something else to the culture of the 1990s. It was the American writer Walter Ong who claimed that 'controlled spontaneity' would be the characteristic of a televisual age. The spontaneity and freely-expressed emotions of an oral culture would combine with the linear restrained order of a print culture, into a distinct 'secondary orality': contingent, self-conscious, lateral, it would value emotion and spontaneity, but only in defined spaces.

Some of the evidence for this is plain to see. Spontaneity doesn't just happen outside society in subcultures or in childhood. Instead it has been given its

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own times and spaces. This is evident in the self-image of the elite workers who stress, sometimes almost obsessively, the pleasure of their work, the scope for creativity, the freedom and lightness they experience even within the most rigid pressures for hard work and productivity.

In the leisure industries, relaxation, escape and letting-go, are organised in carefully-controlled environments like Alton Towers and Euro-Disneyland. Two classic 1990s' consumer goods are sold for the control they offer: BSB promises parents that they can control what their children watch, while the new personal phones (PCNs) are set to be sold with the promise that they can be used to keep track of wayward teenage children. Shopping too now has its controlled environments, combining rational consumption with the carefully structured pleasures of impulse. The 1990s equivalent of the dropout works in the City during the week and goes to Acid House parties at the weekend.

Each in its way is part of a much wider perception that the 1980s found the wrong balance between freedom and order, control and spontaneity. It got the wrong disciplines (those of authoritarian states) combined with the wrong freedoms (freedom to make money come what may). For the 1990s the problem will be to find a more appropriate balance.

A large part of the answer may come from the changing position of religion. This is the second theme I want to discuss. For if it is true that a new set of disciplines are being brought to bear across the world and across daily life, then we can be certain that they will be brought to bear unevenly. For those on the receiving end, those who experience the controls without the benefits, there will be a continued search for ideologies of redemption. I take it as read that the underlying impulses towards equality and co-operation will not go away. But what remain unclear are the forms that they will take.

As the marxist/materialist ideologies fall away, as the redemptive ideologies of industrial society cave in from their own failures, others will surely return: more ancient ones, more millennial, more other-worldly. Decisively perhaps, religion may be set to replace socialism as the base for any ideology of opposition. An older socialism may survive in many places: in India, Brazil, Peru and South Africa. But through much of the world new forms will emerge, from within older traditions (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist) and from the newer ones (New Age, evangelical).

Unlike the socialists (or the greens or the feminists), religions alone have proved ultimately resistant to co-option, to having their most essential values corrupted by power. It is surely significant that in 1989, just as the East Germans demonstrating in Dresden and Leipzig rested on a base in the Lutheran church, so did the guerrillas of El Salvador

depend crucially on the church's communities of the base. It is surely significant too, that as postmodernism sweeps the intelligentsia and the cosmopolitan elites, it is religion, charismatic, fundamentalist and evangelical, that is stalking the suburbs and small towns.

Religions carry a sense of final destiny, a sense that socialism has lost in the prelude to the second millennium. Perhaps now that Utopias are less likely to be achieved out in the social world, or for that matter in a private world of material accumulation, they will again be looked for inside. And if even a few of the possible apocalypses come, that will be the only place to find them.

Despite everything, however, and despite the collapse of communism, the Left probably has little to fear from the 90s. In a mild and cautious social-democratic form it may again become hegemonic in Europe. In a harder form it may take power in the rapidly industrialising countries of the Third World. The international labour movement seems to have survived the threats of the 1980s. Everywhere the need for collective solutions to collective problems, the need to secure greater equality, remains intact. These are the deep structures, the constant spring of socialist thought.

But while these survive, the philosophical forms through which they have been thought seem set to change. For the two themes of this article, the one about control, the second about faith and religion, share a common element. The 20th century started with a struggle between two profoundly humanist ideologies, the bourgeois liberalism of capitalism, and the marxism and social democracy of the working classes. At the century's end, the things that humans have done both to each other and to the physical world have made humanisms much harder to sustain. The hubris of believing that humans were inherently good, or that they could be trusted with total power, has been revealed as false and dangerous. Instead we now seem to be recreating a set of powers to keep us in check, in submission to God and the planet. Having found an enormous power in industry and technology, we are beginning to back away. Having realised much of the 19th-century agenda of scientific progress we have learnt the truth of Bernard Shaw's comment that 'there are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it.'

Similar words might be appropriate for Eastern Europe, for whose people the 1990s seem likely to bring a short delirium and a long hangover. Perhaps this will bring them closer to us, as we experience our own morning-after-the-party-of-industrial-growth. Perhaps too, a rapidly ageing population is permanently shifting the centre of gravity away from youth towards a more sober, restrained age of grey. Perhaps, quite literally, the new times will turn out to be old times. •

Life And Times



At Your Leisure: At the beginning of the 1980s 'leisure' was a risky business for private finance, associated with

seafront arcades, bingo halls and holiday camps. Today it is a major growth sector.

The new finance is looking to create total environments designed to extract the maximum revenue out of every visitor. Hence a stream of multi-million pound projects in Britain with names like Wonderland, Ocean Village, Cascades, Flamingoland and Waterworld, mixing themed leisure parks with fairground attractions, plenty of retailing and little or no contact with the natural world.

The Henley Centre for Social Forecasting estimates that some 96% of all leisure spending nowadays is based on 'consumption' rather than 'participation', yet popular self-organisation still has a habit of breaking through. From 'I ran the world' charity half-marathons to sponsored cycle rides (2m bicycles sold last year), from disabled sports to the more exotic forms of specialist holidays such as trekking in Nepal, or hang-gliding in the Brecons, leisure is developing in contradictory directions.

On the one hand there are the themed environments, where the desire for danger and imaginative fantasy is tightly structured and controlled ('white-knuckle' rides at Alton Towers or organised Dungeons And Dragons holidays); on the other hand we have specialist hobbies and pursuits where the emotions and dangers are real.

And green concerns are likely to exert an increasing pressure against package tourism and for environment-friendly holidays and weekend pursuits.

The phenomenal growth in car-boot sales is not only a popular reaction to the colonisation of the high street by the chainstores, it also represents a recovery of old marketplace, hobbyist and collecting skills.

As political parties compete to define the 'quality of life' in the 1990s, the uses of leisure will become a paradigm for the good society in the way that the workplace or the community once were for other generations. •

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