

Coming Up For Air

The collapse of the East European regimes has been widely interpreted as the final victory of the West. **Stuart Hall** and **Ernesto Laclau** take issue. They argue that it opens up quite new prospects for the Left

The Left has been thrown on to the defensive by events in Eastern Europe. Stuart Hall argues that the collapse of the communist regimes is a precondition for the Left's own renewal.

Developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have been so far-reaching and swift that there has hardly been time to make a considered response. The prevailing definition - 'The West Has Won' - threatens to blanket out everything else, and the Left's response has sometimes seemed hesitant, defensive and lacking in conviction. Of course, there has been no lack of readiness to provide responses for us. 'Your pack of cards has collapsed. Communism is dead. Where can you turn? What ground is there for you to stand on now?' This proposition has been put many times in recent weeks, by media presenters (and some of their studio 'guests') - often with a look of

triumphal glee in their eyes. Gotcha! It has also been in evidence from some eminent and respected commentators (Peter Jenkins, Hugo Young and John Lloyd come to mind), who ought to know better. Events in Eastern Europe appear to have precipitated a last-minute rush of blood to otherwise cool and rational heads.

Some of this has been directed at *Marxism Today*, which now finds itself in the double bind of being, *simultaneously*, pilloried by the Left for having abandoned the One True Faith, and held responsible by the Right for keeping It in place! Something odd is going on here; and one is beginning to suspect that it is compounded somewhat by the equivocal nature of the Left's own response to recent events.

How *should* the Left respond? Of course, in these circumstances, 'the Left' is at best a necessary fiction, already in pretty bad shape before the Wall began to crumble: buffeted by Thatcherism, confused by 'new times'

and somewhat lacking a sense of direction. So a single, coherent response was too much to expect. Trotskyists, for example, have convinced themselves that their anti-stalinist credentials make them proof against everything which has been taking place. They have not been embarrassed by the spectacle of the people, without the aid of the party, rising up against the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' without the aid of the party, which has been unfolding nightly on our television screens, and which has been putting some of their most sacred theories to the test.

Labour spokespersons, on the other hand, have had very little original to contribute. They speak as if the events in Eastern Europe have nothing whatsoever to do with them, except in so far as they prove that the Labour Party were right all the time. John Lloyd has also vigorously argued a not dissimilar case. Now that Stalinism has collapsed, there is no alternative for the Left except to line up with Neil Kinnock, warts and all. Of course, the collapse of the one-party state command-economy version of socialism does require the Left to think again about both the differences and the common ground between what used to be called the 'revolutionary' and the 'reformist' traditions. But the argument that if one fails, there is nowhere to turn but to swallow the other whole is, historically, an inverted version of an old cold-war logic. Its premise is that, between them, Stalinism and Neil Kinnock exhaust the whole of human history - an unlikely proposition! Since many of us have never accepted the view that Stalinism or labourism are the *only* ways of being a socialist, the collapse of the East European systems of state socialism is not a sufficient reason to believe that we must all simply fall into line, uncritically, behind the Labour leadership.

What of the response of the 'broad' Left - the non- or Labour-aligned Left, including many socialist feminists and others in the social movements? My impression is that this section of the Left is depressed, rather than exhilarated, by the unexpected turn of recent events. And with good reason, for they are being widely interpreted as the 'death of socialism'. And the unpleasant truth is that some part of what has been understood as 'socialism' by the world in general, and by much of the Left itself, is indeed crumbling to dust in Eastern Europe.

What is preoccupying the Left is that which is emerging from the ashes of the old system, the troubling shapes of the future. There are dire warnings and forebodings. The talk is of chaos and instability, following the collapse of the old regimes; the 'Balkanisation' of Eastern Europe - and perhaps of the Soviet Union too; the new threat from a united German 'Fatherland'; the resurgence of nationalism, religious zealotry and ethnic conservatism; the crypto-fascists, young and old, beginning to slip

back into place. There are fears of the breakdown of law and order, the rise in crime, the disappearance of the extensive systems of welfare that did make those societies, however authoritarian, also in some ways more egalitarian than our own. In particular, there is alarm in left circles at the blind faith in 'market forces' that has been sweeping these countries, as a panacea for their economic ills, crystallised in the spectacle of Lech Walesa touring Wall Street, offering Poland for sale to the highest bidder.

These are some of the constituent elements of the shape of the immediate future, and there is no denying the dangers which they could present. We are passing through exceedingly volatile and dangerous times. Political developments in Eastern Europe are being driven, principally, by popular reaction *against* what prevailed until yesterday: and this can be a recipe for instability.

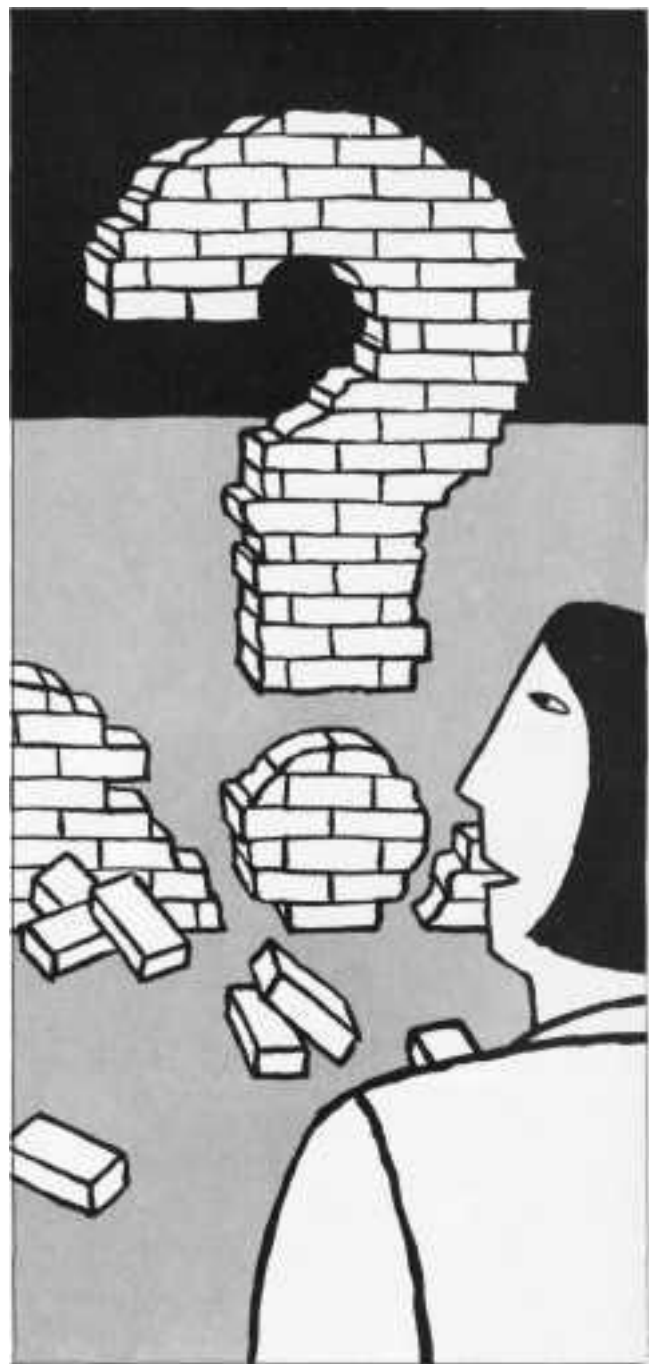
The capacity for uncoordinated, and largely spontaneous, movements in 'civil society' to take on and dismantle authoritarian state regimes with a minimum of violence is a historic new development, the meaning of which the Left needs to ponder long and hard. It throws into question some of our most favoured theories about revolutionary scenarios, the nature of the state, the balance between 'force' and 'politics' in modern society. But Romania or East Germany cannot permanently resolve their problems by instant plebiscite from whatever crowd happens to turn up in the central square on Monday evenings. When 'communism' became the official ideology of Eastern Europe (without actually re-shaping the consciousness of large numbers of its peoples), fascism went underground - but it certainly did not disappear. (One of the problems of declaring all social contradictions resolved as a diktat by the party apparatus without any way of real social antagonisms and interest being represented through some genuine democratic system.) Our 'common European home', in addition to being the cradle of democracy, equality and liberty, has also been, for much of its history, an extremely violent place: spawning many horrendously reactionary ideologies (nationalism, ethnocentrism, imperialism and racism, to name but four). As the lid is lifted, all manner of creepy-crawly things are going to emerge from the woodwork. What is being dismantled is a complex authoritarian structure, highly centralised and bureaucratized, held in place by the exercise of coercive force. No law of history could guarantee that its dissolution would be peaceful, orderly and 'nice'.

Difficult, dangerous, perhaps even terrible, times may well await us. But the Left should not have been taken so much by surprise. What else did we expect? In societies where only the party and church have any substance as organisations, isn't it to be expected that opposition to the former naturally gravitates towards the latter? This may not be the

scenario secular 'lefties' imagined, but many things are about to occur which were not 'dreamt of in our philosophy...' If ordinary people can't buy a loaf of bread or a bar of soap, month after month, it is not surprising that the first thing they want to do is to drive 50 miles over the frontier, and stare into the well-stocked window of a West German supermarket for a few hours. Where official double-talk was Truth - five year plans always over-fulfilled, no crime or drunks or Aids victims under 'actual existing socialism' - it is no surprise that even the prevarications and evasions of the Western media are experienced like a breath of fresh air. These rapid oscillations are not comfortable to live with. But they are likely to continue for some time and it is not surprising that they should have occurred. The Left should understand better than it appears to have done the volatile, contradictory and contingent way in which history moves.

It is right to underline the dangers of the present moment. However, the Left can only address these difficult questions adequately if, at the same time, it is saying something else. It ought to be celebrating the new release of energy, the opening of new possibilities, the new ideas and experiences spilling across the old barriers and divisions, which the democratic movements of Eastern Europe have, at last, made possible. For surely it is the Left which, in the end, has most to gain from them. The Berlin Wall was a symbolic barrier, above all for the Left. It divided our thinking, shutting out alternatives, preventing the posing of difficult questions, standing in the way of the renewal of socialist ideas, forcing everything and everyone into the simple and binary alternatives of the cold war: 'Their' side or 'Our' side. Whether we gave it much thought or not, everything we have thought and done in the name of socialist ideals in the West since 1945 has been affected by the political ice age of the cold war.

The reduction of all political possibilities to the stark and simplifying oppositions of the cold war has been exceedingly damaging for the Left as a whole - all varieties and everywhere. Whether aligned with them or not, the character of these 'state socialist' regimes has been the major factor preventing the renewal of the democratic and egalitarian project - the vocation - of the Left. It had nothing to gain from being confined to the model of 'socialist reality' which prevailed in Eastern Europe. One does not have to collude with crude anti-communism, or regret the collapse of tsarism in 1917, or deny that East European regimes ever did anything good for their people, to make that point, unequivocally. The tragic fact is that 'actual existing socialism' ate up, absorbed the energies from, and stood, for decades, barring the path to the self-renewal of the Left. Far from helping a more democratic, socially equal and just, less racist and patriarchal



form of civilisation to struggle into existence and to claim the promise of emancipation, the long nightmare of Stalinism and Brezhnevism, the tragedies of Hungary and the 'Prague Spring', the thousands of heroic men and women whose lives were eaten up by the very cause they served so well and so selflessly, are among the main reasons why the Left has so often been in danger of losing its way.

Perhaps this is a time when one has to speak personally. It is hard to forget, in 1989, that other moment - the moment of my own political formation: 1956. That was the year of Suez and Hungary. For good or ill, I had never subscribed to the illusion that 'actual existing socialism' was, or looked likely to deliver for its people, the real thing. It always seemed to me a horrendously tragic *detour*. But the sight of Soviet tanks on the streets of Budapest clinched it for me, for ever. Perhaps we were fortunate, for in that very moment, the Anglo-

French conspiracy took the tanks into Egypt to 'restore' the Suez Canal: and it became crystal clear to me that what 'being on the left' meant - indeed, *required* - was the endless and unending critique of, the vigilance against, *both* these forms of reaction. What is sometimes called the 'first new Left' was born in that moment - in that 'third space', the space between uncritical obeisance to 'the West' (including social democracy, which in so many respects had simply thrown in its lot with the West) and doctrinal subservience to 'actual existing socialism'.

Some deeply ingrained political habits flow from that experience. A deep suspicion of the all-encompassing state, without entrenched protection for minorities and indeed majorities, no matter in whose name it was established. A scepticism about the capacity of the centralised, command economy to meet the rapidly diversifying and expanding needs of modern societies. A fear of the collapse of politics and the economy, of state and class, class and party. A reappraisal of certain features which, in the revolutionary scenario, were always scorned as 'bourgeois liberties'. Above all, a conviction that 'actual existing socialism' had got the relationship between socialism and democracy dead wrong. And that, in the second half of the 20th century - in the First, Second and Third Worlds - democracy would turn out to be the really revolutionary - not the 'reformist' - element in the socialist tradition.

I say all this, not at all to flatter my own consistency - a much overrated virtue in politics. But events in Eastern Europe (and now in South Africa) make me want to insist that some part of the Left at least has, for decades, been trying to define a socialist alternative which was rooted in a profound and unequivocal repudiation of 'the state socialist model'. Some of us have been trying to operate politically in this third or 'new Left' space ever since. And this gives us hope, as well as fears, about the coming decades. We should not be alarmed by the collapse of 'actual existing socialism' since, as socialists, we *have been waiting for it to happen for three decades*.

This certainly does not mean that any of us can absolve ourselves from the shadow of Stalinism and its progeny. Nobody who still belongs in some way to the socialist tradition can wash his or her hands of responsibility for it. It was done in our name. It was part of what we were committed to. It remains our tragedy. We will carry its mark on us forever - history is a hard and unforgiving taskmaster. However, *Marxism Today*, which grows out of a different tradition from my own, nevertheless, at a certain point in its history, made a courageous and irrevocable break with that legacy and the version of socialism it claimed to represent. It is over a decade since *MT* repudiated the last vestige of a defence of 'actual existing

socialism', and began to develop an alternative position. It did so openly and without qualification - and at considerable cost, not least from parts of the Left itself. The whole argument about realignment and renewal, about confronting those confusing and contradictory new times and opening a new political agenda, often on topics sacred and taboo to the Left, was predicated on this 'turn'. It has often been wrong - sometimes indefensibly so. But, had it not made that break with the old models, people with my political formation could not and would never have written for it.

In its terrifying and confusing way, what had happened in Eastern Europe does not undermine - it vindicates the difficult, incomplete project on which *MT* has been engaged for the last 12 years. It is time for those parts of the Left, at least, who feel some commitment to that project, to speak about the events which are unrolling in the East from a perspective of hope.

The collapse of the East European regimes represents an enormous opportunity for the Left. Ernesto Laclau argues that it marks the end of old clichés and old certainties. It is time to think afresh.

Ultimately, there is nothing negative for the Left in the current collapse of the system of convictions which has grounded its discourse for most of the 20th century. Marxism as a *foundation* of that discourse has certainly come to an end, but this very fact makes it possible to contextualise the categories of that system of convictions, to see them as contingent and limited products instead of considering them as an intellectual and political horizon beyond all possibility of questioning. This opens the possibility of exploring the present situation with a more open mind, no longer dominated by old-fashioned clichés.

There are four areas in which drastic revisions are needed in the classic conception of socialism. The first is the sharp opposition between capitalism as a system based on market mechanisms and socialism as a system based on the principle of planning and the *social* management of the productive process. After the disastrous experience of bureaucratic management of the economy in the Eastern bloc, and the present efforts to supersede the crisis through the introduction of market mechanisms, there is little doubt that *any* economic arrangement that the Left can realistically propose will consist in one form or another of a mixed economy.

But it is important to be aware of the historical reasons which led to the identification of socialism with central planning. It was the vision of capitalism as an economic system grounded in the operation of the market and governed by the search for *individual* profit that led to a vision of socialism as its exact



reverse: a system based in *social* management. The problem was that, if the only content of *social* was its mere opposition to *individual*, social was identical with the general or abstract form of the community.

The possibility that social management could also be democratic depended, in consequence, entirely on the emergence of a social force which was in charge of it and which represented the universal interests of the community.

This force was, of course, the working class. As the process of increasing proletarianisation was seen as part of the essence of capitalism, it was assumed that the working class would end up coinciding with the vast majority of the population - its social management of the economy could not, consequently, fail to be democratic.

But it is precisely here that the difficulties started. As this process of proletarianisation had not been realised in the

societies in which capitalism had been banished and central planning introduced, the 'social' of social management could not be democratic, and the function of embodying the universal interests of the community had to pass from a social class to the state and the party bureaucracy. And in the experience of central planning in the West there was always a particular and limited social agency - an alliance between the trade unions and the state, for instance - which assumed the representation of the 'social' universality. The gap between the universality implicit in the notion of *social* control and the limitation of the historical agents embodying it, is at the root of the crisis of socialism.

Does this mean that the failure of socialism - both in its communist and in its social-democratic versions - leaves us without a future for the Left and with no alternative but accepting the marvels of the market as a self-regulatory mechanism, capable of ensuring social reproduction in an harmonious way? Not at all. The trick that central planning is incapable of performing cannot be achieved either by the magic of any 'invisible hand'. The newly emerging political elites in Eastern Europe, which are today so prone to succumb to the utopianism of the free market, will learn this lesson very quickly.

What we have to do is to move away from the mutually exclusive, market versus conscious social control. Political regulation cannot rely on any magic formula. The alternative for the Left is no longer to try and wish away the limitations of the historical agents who are supposed to embody social planning and control, but to come to terms with those limitations by accepting that they are inherent in the very nature of society.

If we cannot any longer dream about a 'universal class', we can at least bring about a *relative* universality by widening the process of social decision-making, bringing to the fore a multiplicity of *limited, fragmented* and *partial* social agents, who together enter into the constitution of a 'collective will'.

This is why the project of the Left has to abandon the Utopian world of *social* control and be redefined in terms of radical and plural democracy. In the same way that the notion of 'social control' no longer holds any water if it is related through an essential link to the notion of *central* planning, the notion of 'the market' can be redefined in such a way that it loses its necessary links with the ideas of self-regulatory mechanisms, and unlimited profit maximisation.

An essentially pragmatic attitude to the question of social regulation, together with a determination to prevent the latter taking place in a power structure dominated by capitalist interests, has to characterise the project of a new Left.

The second way in which the Left's approach has to change concerns the question of social agency. Here also we find that the political imagery of the Left is dominated by the shadows of the past. We know well all those desperate attempts to continue living in a phantasmic world in which the old words continue to be used when their original meaning has abandoned them.

One of these attempts is the so-called 'enlarged' conception of the working class. We are living, it is argued, in a world in which 95% - if not 99% - of the population belongs to the working class. There is no need to honour this type of argument with the dignity of a reply. People desperate to cling to old languages, to continue inhabiting an imaginary universe in which revered worlds continue receiving lip-service, can spend all the time they want accumulating criteria of working-class belonging which only come together in their intellectual constructs: the fact still remains that these criteria are constantly fragmented and re-articulated in the real world in which we live and there is no alchemy that can bring them together in the mythical unity of a 'class'.

Is it not sufficient to see the proliferation of national, regional, or ethnic identities in Eastern Europe or in the country which was supposed to be the birthplace of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Or the multitude of new identities in the West which have accompanied the decline of the welfare state? Or the original forms in which national and popular identities are emerging all the time in the Third World?

Again, this plurality and fragmentation opens the possibility of a more radical and democratic politics than in the past, given that the project of the Left has to consist of a painful effort to bring together many demands and identities through political dialogue and negotiation, instead of relying on the pre-existing unity of a sector destined by history to embody the universal class.

In this context, it is worth remembering that formulae which seem libertarian and anti-bureaucratic, such as the democracy of the direct producer, have a totalitarian potential, given that - unless the whole population were engaged in the process of direct production - decisions have to be taken which affect consumers, participants in the education system, neighbours of the factories who have an ecological stake in what is produced there, etc. No simple arrangement based on Rousseauian direct democracy or some kind of council system is, as a result, compatible with the complexities of democratic politics in present-day societies.

In the third place, the Left has to abandon the myth of the base/superstructure dichotomy - one level in which interests would be constituted and another in which they would be represented. No modern political system - in fact, no contemporary socie-

ty - functions that way. If we have an increasing fragmentation of social life at the level of what traditionally was called the 'infrastructure' - between different groups of workers, 'races' and sexes, for instance - the so-called political level is not just a level of *representation* of the demands of the different groups but, in many cases, of the constitution of the unity of the groups themselves.

In that sense, the *political spaces* in which the Left operates are changing substantially. The traditional point of reference of left-wing thought was the nation-state, and on that basis, a distinction was recognised between civil society (where interests were constituted, and found whatever coherence and homogeneity they had) and that of the state (where those interests were represented).

Today we witness a double movement of disintegration in this scheme. On the one hand the process of social fragmentation is making issues, demands and grievances more local, less able to operate spontaneously as aggregates expressing a unified collective will - and this in turn enlarges the functions of the political system. On the other hand, the ability of the *national* political system and state to engage in social regulation is declining, in the face of the internationalisation of forces operating at a world level. So we see the development of both localism and the international as arenas for the creation of political alternatives. The Left will be unable to overcome its present crisis if it fails to expand its creativity in both these areas.

Finally, let us say something about an old bone of contention within the Left: the well-known polarity, reform/revolution. In one sense we can say that the matter is settled definitively in favour of reform. The attempts to reconstruct society from their very foundations have led to disastrous and monstrous experiences - amongst other things, because the (absurd) assumption that society has a foundation and that it could be turned upside down could only lead to totalitarian dreams by the force which was supposed to perform this impossible metaphysical task.

But, in another sense, the cautious piecemeal engineering of traditional social democracy has also proved to be a blind alley: it has led only to an unsavoury statism and bureaucratism which has seen an accumulation of unsatisfied social demands and a more and more unrepresentative political system.

What we need today is what we could call 'revolutionary reformism': one which enlarges the space of representation of the political system and constitutes a new collective will as a result of the *political* aggregation of social demands. Once again, the adequate name for this project is 'radical and plural democracy'.

'The project of the Left has to consist of a painful effort to bring together many demands and identities through political dialogue'

