

REFLECTIONS

Andrea Stuart resolves to give up on giving up in 1991

Original Sins

Whatever happened to vice? You remember vice? Sin. Bad habits. That sort of thing. I'll tell you what happened to it: we gave it up, that's what happened. It all started in the 80s. And by the end of the decade most of us had cut down (or out) at least one of the following: smoking, drinking, drugs.

In addition, we have endeavoured to eliminate caffeine, control our intake of preservatives, and regulate our consumption of meat. We are discouraged from having sex, or even sitting in the sun any more. By the time the low-fat, high-virtue 1990s rolled around: 'Nothing for me, I've given up', had become enshrined as the battle whimper of a generation.

In America, where 'giving up' has become its own *raison d'être*, they already have a term for it, pleasure anorexia. In some Mid-Western states there is talk of prohibition. In LA the old style 'party people' have turned into born-again abstainers who meet at mineral water bars to shoot the breeze before their AA meetings or yet another early night.

Those who have been out of LA for a while are helpfully told that the most reliable way to meet a new partner or catch up with old acquaintances is at morning meetings of Cocaine Anonymous. Giving up is no longer a life enhancer, it has become a lifestyle.

And things aren't much better here. Sitting at a dinner party recently, I realised sadly that there wasn't a single person who hadn't 'given something up' in the past year. I am no exception. I now find it easier when ordering in restaurants to eliminate what I *don't* eat, instead of choosing what I do. These days when I encounter lone smokers at parties, or people who sneak off to the loo to do a line of coke, I feel the sort of indulgent nostalgia that previously I reserved for those old hippies who travel to Stonehenge each year to celebrate the summer solstice.

Nothing sums up the new morality quite like people's new year's resolutions. Ask

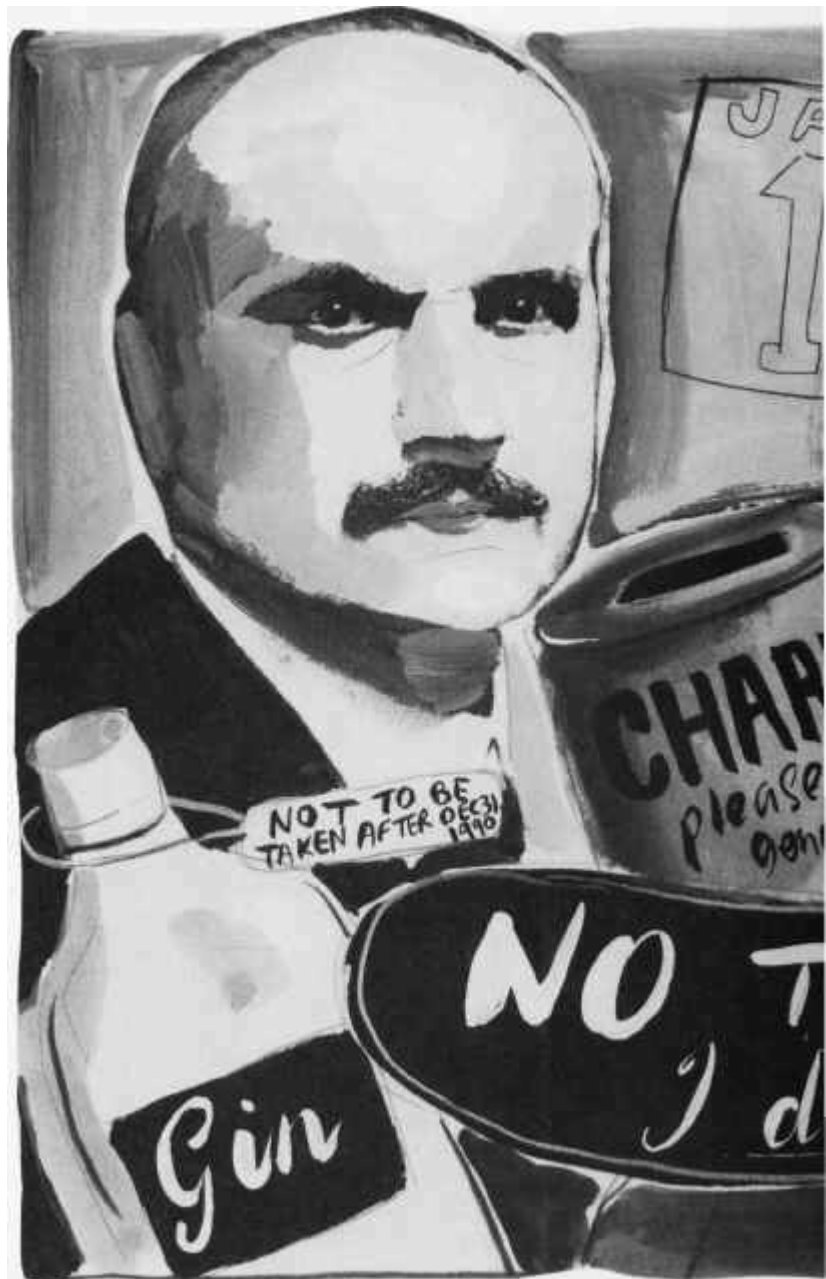
yourself, how many things have you committed yourself to giving up? How much emphasis have you put on the things you'd like to take up? If an informal poll of my acquaintances is anything to go by, your answer is likely to be heavy on the deprivation, low on the action. With one exception. Almost all of us will be determined to take up or do more about our health; like doing more exercise. And that exception will prove the rule. Because we will take up health with the grim determination and self-congratulatory zeal that has characterised our decision to give up everything else.

Now before you get up in arms, I am not saying that it isn't perfectly acceptable - even laudable - to have given up cigarettes, or drugs, or meat. I don't object to giving things up *per se*. Many of the things that we have jettisoned are certainly no great loss. Indeed it may have improved the quality of our lives quite substantially.

But what happens in a world in which morality is defined not by what you do, but by what you don't do? The answer is: not a lot. Despite the virtuous frisson associated with our various abstinences, I suspect that no more of us are positively committing our time, effort or energy to political, charitable or educational concerns. Despite the caring sharing rhetoric of the 'nice 90s', there is no indication that we are one jot more involved in improving the collective lot.

In fact our commitment seems to have actually deteriorated. In 1974, one in four Americans gave their time to 'civic political concerns', now it's only one in five. In Britain, a recent poll found that one-third of the population did not feel that they had a duty to give what they could to charity. In fact, one year into the kinder decade, donations are actually down.

In 1987, 80% of those polled said they had given money within the previous month, this year's figure for the same month was 71%. So concerned are charity organisations about declining levels



of support that a number of them have allegedly met to discuss a joint advertising campaign that stresses the importance of giving.

Whether or not you belong to the 90% of the population who still believe that the government and not charities is responsible for those in need, is beside the point. The Thatcherite revolution was supposed to produce a new breed of person, who felt personally responsible for doing good works, to replace the idea of a responsible state. And what the figures suggest is that this simply hasn't happened. In-

stead, the privatising of our social world has produced a narcissistic philosophy focused on caring for the self and one's own condition.

When this ethos of self-denial is transferred into a larger arena, what emerges is a social policy that focuses on denial and proscription. Banning, cautioning and prohibiting have become the governmental equivalents of 'giving up' in the personal sphere. In the States, Nancy Reagan took care of the drug menace by cautioning the public to 'Just say no'. In Britain we countered the complexity of the Aids dilem-



Illustration: Beverly Levy

ma with a series of advertisements starring a chisel and a glacier.

The equation of sensual deprivation with virtue is as old as the hair shirt. Renunciation can provide an instant DIY moral transformation that allows us to feel good about ourselves while doing the absolute minimum for humanity. Governments realise that it is a lot cheaper to spend money on tv commercials telling people not to consume drugs and not to fuck, than it is to enable, support or provide an adequate infrastructure to deal with the Aids epidemic. These

gestures are the ultimate low-cost, high-yield PR campaign: maximum visibility, minimum commitment.

In this mood of virtuous self-denial, the only indulgence we still allow ourselves is the one that isn't based on sensual pleasure at all, technology. Some of the most aesthetically streamlined individuals I know - people who before 'the scare' were committed Perrier imbibers but are now devotees of the still Malvern water (those bubbles were a bit too racy anyway) - feel it is ok to show off their new cd players/dictaphones/pagers.

This is because technology (like masturbation) is totally in keeping with the current puritan *Zeitgeist*, it's hygienic, solitary, and you can enjoy it in the safety of your own home.

Sex, on the other hand, appears to have little to recommend it. In the context of Aids one would have thought we needed, or deserved, to find sexual satisfaction more than ever before. It promotes a feeling of well-being and erodes our ever-growing sense of isolation. But instead of investing even a tiny portion of our energies into finding positive and safe ways towards sensual fulfilment, the media has gleefully declared sex to be 'over'. Somewhere in our deeply puritan souls we feel we have got what we deserved. And abstinence has been our penance.

At the bottom of this rather depressing mood lies a crisis of faith. First God died, the great horizons of modernism narrowed and darkened, then marxism fell terminally ill. Science and progress have proved false idols. With the collapse of the grand narratives our collective belief systems have taken something of a battering. And we are now so uncertain that our search for a state of grace has turned in on itself.

Hence our obsession with consumption, our fixation on the body. We feel that if we can't control anything else we can at least struggle with our bodies and dictate what

we put into them. We have lost any confidence in our ability to affect change in any but this the most limited and personal of spheres. Our bodies, our battlefields.

In the 60s and 70s, 'the personal is political' was the slogan of change. In the 80s, Thatcherism hijacked the personal, jettisoned the political ('there is no such thing as society'), and re-worked consumerism as the ultimate expression of personal freedom. In the 90s, collective action has been replaced by individual salvation. And we are left with only two political options that can make us feel good about ourselves: 'caring consumption' (changing the world by buying a bottle of Ecover) on the one hand, and self-denial on the other.

Though much fevered debate has accompanied the 80s' phenomenon of acquiring things, very little has been said about giving things up. Maybe that's because they are merely different sides of the same coin. Both focus on individual response and centre around consumption. One on what you *will* consume, the other on what you *won't*. Both console us that we are indeed exercising our power and independence. That we are making a difference. But neither of them facilitates the kind of action that brings about significant change, nor do they help us create links or affect a rapprochement between individual and collective needs.#

Dangerous Win

The winner of the *Marxism Today* Student Supplement Hazardous Sex Competition was Jess Harper from Edinburgh. We asked for five further examples of Hazardous Sex based on Edward Dorn's poem of that name.

The winning entry:

Sex with a well-hung parliament

Sex using a three-line whip

Sex during full entry into a monetary system

Sex with a Living Marxist (or a lie detector)

Sex with a member from the No Turning Back Group and, at any cost, avoid sex for a fourth term

Jess Harper

The prize collection of New Times books and a copy of Edward Dorn's anthology of poetry, *Abhorrences*, is on its way, along with an annual subscription to *Marxism Today*.