

# Moving On

From Bill Morris, deputy general secretary, Transport and General Workers Union  
Many commentators are prescribing a role for trade unions in the 1990s.

We are told we must fight each other in 'beauty contests' to win single union, no-strike deals. We are told we must not oppose attacks on national bargaining structures so that employers can play off one region of workers against another. We are told we cannot hope to recruit in low-density sectors so the only form of growth can be through merger.

To allow these negative views to dictate our role in life after Thatcher would be to accept that her anti-collective ideology has worked. My union rejects these notions as short-sighted and self-defeating.

David Metcalf (MT September) seems to imply an even worse scenario: unions themselves can do nothing; it is the forces around them that will dictate their future. This passive role of player in someone else's game we also reject. I see a

bright future for the trade-union movement, depending largely on the path unions themselves take.

Our own history, right up to this day, is a history of men. Middle-aged (white) men have dominated the trade-union movement, and it is their faces that have always been in the news as our representatives. But the growth in the numbers of women entering the labour market, particularly in the service sector, is radically altering the face of labour in Britain, and we must respond to this change by reflecting it within our own ranks.

My own union is changing its structures to appoint women full-time officials and also encourage women to get involved as lay activists. Much of our publicity and recruitment material is aimed at women and their distinct needs.

Our private surveys have shown that, far from not wanting unions, the bulk of service-sector workers have never actually been asked to join one. Where they have been invited

to join, women workers would rather be approached by a woman than by a man – so we are developing women recruitment teams. This rule also applies to the growing number of ethnic minority workers in Britain, although clearly the movement has even further to go in this regard.

One hundred and fifty years of history must be treated with the care and respect it deserves. It is our duty to nurture a progressive agenda, one that looks at the issues relevant to the new workforce while not neglecting the needs of large sections of the working population that have depended on trade-union protection for many years.

I do not pretend there is an overnight solution. Indeed some unions will continue to take a narrow, short-term approach in pursuit of quick, short-term gains. But with a base of 1.25m members, the Transport and General Workers Union is a key part of progressive change, not of passive submission. ●

## Undesirable

After years struggling for sexual and domestic relations to be recognised as important political issues, feminist and gay activists can only be uneasy reading the series of articles entitled 'Desire' (MT August).

With the exception of Richard Dyer, who asks us to question heterosexuality as the pre-given norm, the writers, particularly Maureen Freely and Andrea Stuart, unimaginatively replicate neo-conservative assumptions. Namely that our beds and homes are conceptually private, with no political or cultural significance. Thus, brutish sex can be enjoyed – played out between the sheets – in a world where gender relations are defined as being both consensual and equal.

The trivialisation endemic to these articles accentuates, in contrast, the reality. Our sexuality is policed, as Maureen Freely suggests, but not by Sheila Jeffreys. Women in Britain today are abused and exploited by male partners who believe it is their right; lesbians and gay men are oppressed by state and civil society in order to preserve the patriarchal ideal. Does it need saying that sexual and domestic relations are acutely political – intimately connected to the allocation of power, resources and work and essentially involved in the reproduction of social reactions and cultural values?

Yet this is not our biological destiny: an oppositional sexual politics is possible. A politics that begins by critically deconstructing sexual relations, realising that who and what we desire both shapes and is shaped by other social practices.

As a magazine that aims to be at the critical 'cutting edge', I am amazed you included no articles from a lesbian-feminist perspective. Lesbian feminists have been in the forefront of examining social and gender relations, and in attempting to re-create an oppositional erotica with progressive values.

Maureen Freely is right to question how easily this can happen; but she is wrong to sneer at attempts to do so. After 11 years of Thatcherism it is not surprising that privileged women (and men) have succumbed to enjoying the status quo. What is wrong, however, is for people to legitimise their own departure from struggle by undermining those still trying and hopeful for change. ●

Davina Cooper, London

## Union News

From Jim Bewsher, a former official of Nupe

David Metcalf (MT September) asks all the right questions about the future of unions. Unfortunately, he reaches the wrong conclusions.

His central premise, that 'the future of the labour movement is largely in the hands of employers' and that 'concern by unions for their own structure and organisations is very much of secondary importance', is seriously flawed.

He argues that neither changes in the structure of the workforce nor the legislative onslaught explain the decline in membership. On the contrary, the changes in the workforce have been devastating. But mainly because unions have found it difficult to adapt to its different needs. These days, if a club doesn't offer what you want, why bother to join it?

To suggest that the legislation on the closed shop, recognition and immunities has not had a serious effect on union influence flies in the face of experience. It also denies the changes in political climate in the 80s and ignores the fact that employers and unions have conflicting agendas.

A better question would be to ask why these changes have

been possible. Only if unions have not been deeply rooted in democratic society could they be so easily put aside. If they were perceived as meeting the needs of all their potential members, then changes in the law would have been much more difficult.

This is clearly shown in the issue of recognition. David Metcalf suggests there are two possibilities. Brute force as practised by TGWU lorry drivers in the 60s, or 'beauty contests' leading to 'sweet-heart' deals in the 90s. But this is too simple. Recognition is not just a matter between unions and employers, it is a reflection of the balance of power and ideas at a particular time. It would, for example, have been quite unthinkable for GCHQ to have been de-recognised in the 70s. Conversely, the Dock Labour Scheme was abolished with no serious opposition because the balance of power has changed. It was also an industrial practice that few were willing to support into the 90s.

Statutory rights to recognition are essential. But the democratic argument has to be made and won. To do so will require consistency. It's no good insisting that employers

respect a members' ballot if similar democracy is not applied in important matters of union policy.

Unions must continue to recruit non-members, 'though this should have much lower priority than forging links with employers', argues David Metcalf. He is wrong. Unions need membership; but they need to ask why people won't join. The solution doesn't lie in credit cards or cut-price insurance.

Rather, the changes need to relate to a union's main task – representing people at their place of work on matters to do with their work. To be attractive to a changed workforce full of part-timers, women returnees and contract workers, unions must change their ways of working and how they are perceived. In particular, they will have to send out clear messages as to whose interests they have at heart.

These arguments are not new but still need to be made. However, change in priorities is perfectly possible. Some unions are running campaigns on sexual harassment or equal pension rights for part-timers. Today, after much effort, Nupe has a majority of women on its executive.

The future of unions is in their own hands, not 'in the hands of the employers'. ●

## Green Ideology

Although I agree with Shelagh Young that it is a critical failing of 'green experts' to place ideology low on their agendas ('Forum', *MT* August), she has clearly misunderstood Tim O'Riordan's article. For me, what was refreshing was that ideology was up front, permeating O'Riordan's prose. Young missed this because O'Riordan was referring to a global ideology, not another form of the stagnating nation-state ideology we have grown used to.

Global warming will affect the lives of everyone; there will be no overall winner. Nuclear war is the nearest analogy, but the difference is that global warming is actually happening, and the longer effective action is put off the worse this 'World War III' will be. In the face of such a real global crisis, a uniform global response is essential; a global ideology above the nation-state is needed – so why not embody this in an idea of global citizenry?

O'Riordan does not suggest that Third World suffering would be motivation enough for effective anti-global warming action by the West. But what is becoming apparent is that, contrary to the present 'them and us' attitude, the West badly needs the developing nations. It needs them to comply with future greenhouse-gas emission reduction protocols, to conserve the genetic diversity of the wild so as to better adapt to agricultural changes, and its own economy is closely bound to the fortunes of these nations.

In turn, the South must see that the North is serious about a commitment to put its own house in order and redistribute global wealth in a more equitable way, as O'Riordan admirably discusses. Truly, we are living in the era of an interdependency culture.

If you look hard enough, there are positive signs, from the hundreds of thousands of effective citizens' groups worldwide and the acceptance and participation of non-governmental organisations at inter-governmental conferences, to nation-states ceding elements of their sovereignty, both in the European Community and to international institutions.

How the essential changes are accomplished is the biggest gamble, but clear, concise information together with debate on

ideology and responsibility are powerful, essential tools and Tim O'Riordan is to be praised, while Shelagh Young should be asked to keep her pessimistic prejudices to herself, unless she can develop an alternative.

Something along the lines of global citizenry is going to be inevitable, otherwise we are all going to be sunk.●

Philip Parker, Brighton, Editor, the *Greenpeace* magazine

## Cruise Control

My friends and I spend many hours cruising because it is an activity which can take place anywhere. Consequently I enjoyed cruising Gilbert Adair's article (*MT* August). As often, the result was disappointing (in both contexts) because two vital considerations seemed to be omitted. (This was apart from the lengthy references to *Death In Venice*, with its overtones of paedophilia.)

The first is the element of voyeurism involved. It gives the cruising man (do women cruise?) control of the situation through its use as a trigger for fantasy and desire. It is also relatively safe, because most of the objects of cruising are heterosexual men and consequently are not aware that they are being cruised. Men look at women, they are not accustomed to looking at each other, unless they are gay.

Gay men have the satisfaction of inhabiting a secret world in which they are in control. It also gives an element of danger, because when heterosexual men become aware they are the object for the look of another man, they are liable to react violently. We still need

to do much unpacking of this aspect of male behaviour.

This brings me to the second omission, namely that we are referring to a peculiarly masculine mode of behaviour. Herein, surely, lies the ultimate failure of most cruising to reach the desired conclusion of sexual contact. If it did so, the participants must not only confront their own sexuality but also make themselves available to another man. For most men the former is still heavily suppressed. The latter has profound implications for remaining in control, unemotional, dominant and all the other supposedly desirable behaviour that masculinity requires.

We still need to address these issues as men, both gay and straight, in order to enhance desire. Nostalgia for the 50s will not produce this, especially if it ignores the police pogroms, sexism and bitchiness of that miserable era.●

Pete Smith, Leicester

## Ideal Worlds

Geoff Mulgan's thoughtful discussion of individual and collective responsibility (*MT* September) is marred by his fashionable contempt for what he calls 'utopian ideologies'.

He accuses utopias of making childish promises to 'maximise freedom' without demanding reciprocal obligations. This charge is unfounded. Utopias come in various shapes and sizes. But the wish-fulfilment fairyland in which people's desires are instantly satisfied is a minor sub-type of the genre.

Most utopian visions have severely downgraded individual freedom from material and social restraint in favour of some more imperious claim:

for example, a caste-divided and Spartan version of social justice in Plato's *Republic*, or the virtues of temperance, fortitude and prudence in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Utopian thought operates on the ill-defined boundary between social theory and imaginative fiction. It is necessarily speculative, but not unbridled. Systematic speculation about alternative social worlds (both better and worse) has recurred throughout human civilisation. It has certainly formed part of the broad socialist tradition from Charles Fourier to Marge Piercy. We neglect utopias at the risk of intellectual sclerosis and moral impoverishment.

Of course, utopia is not an attainable state. But it is a good discipline to visit imaginary societies from time to time. It's also great fun.●

David Purdy, Manchester

## Pseuds' Corner

As a left-wing academic and trained sociology teacher I have followed the writing of both Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall over the years with much interest, if not always agreement. But what can we make of their discussion 'Clinging To The Wreckage' (*MT* September)? Is it, perhaps, their bid for fame in Private Eye's 'Pseuds' Corner'? It is certainly difficult to make much sense of what is being said. The only conclusion I can come to is that it doesn't matter how well known the person is; if their political understanding is in crisis they are as likely to come up with complete gibberish as a *Sun* leader writer.●

Martin F Burke, London

## Egged On

I don't especially object to Prince Charles's mug-shot adorning the cover of September's *Marxism Today*. But please let us know why he has a red button-hole, when earlier this year you gave Karl Marx, the namesake of the magazine, an egg on his face?●

Brian Nicholls, London

## Editorial Note:

We welcome your letters to add to discussion. Please send them to *MT* Letters, 6-9 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF. (Note change of address.) Brevity means you are more likely to be published. We reserve the right to cut.●



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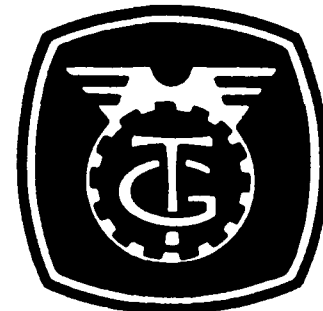
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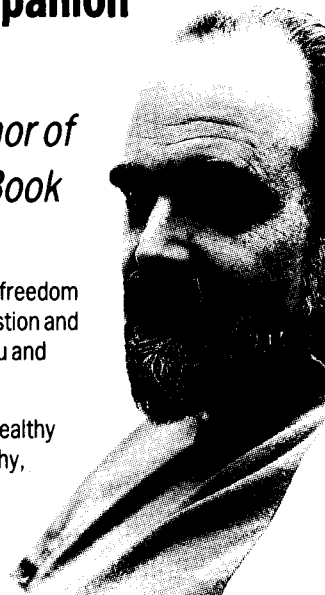
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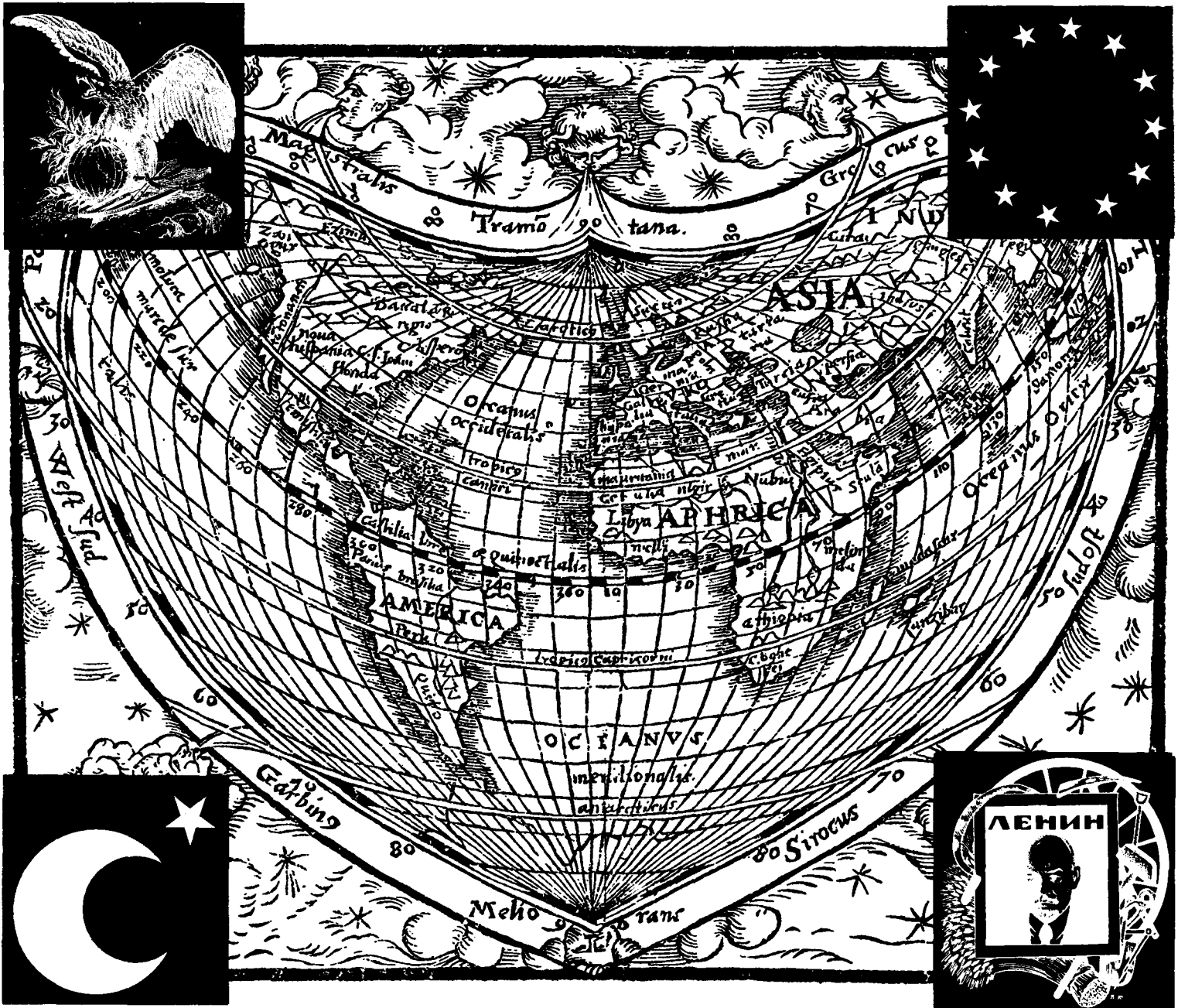
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MT/Oct



# New World Order

**T**he old world has dissolved before our very eyes. The Soviet Union has withdrawn, divided and defeated. A systemic alternative to capitalism is no longer on offer. We are witnessing the end not simply of 1945 but also 1917. But if the old world has collapsed, what will replace it? We can only guess. It is as if there has been an enormous earthquake and the plates are still in unpredictable motion.

Such momentous events require an enormous rethink. Old ways of thinking have been made redundant, previous categories rendered obsolete. What does socialism mean now? How do we make sense of an international crisis in which the two old superpowers are on the same side? This issue is devoted to an analysis of the collapse of the old order and the creation of the new. It starts with an assessment of the significance of 1989 by Eric Hobsbawm. It was a year which already ranks alongside 1917 and 1789 in its historic importance. The collapse of eastern Europe signalled the end of the era of 1917.

This is followed by William Wallace and Martin Walker who discuss what the new world order might look like. Already, within a few months of the end of the cold war, the Gulf crisis has underlined that we live in uncertain times. It is almost inconceivable that such a crisis could have happened in the old bipolar world. It is a reminder, moreover, that the United States remains a formidable power.

Fred Halliday and Joe Stork discuss the politics of the Gulf crisis, and what attitude the Left should adopt towards Saddam Hussein and the possibility of military action by the United States. While Roger Owen outlines the potential scenarios for the Middle East.

Finally, as the party conference season gets under way, Andrew Gamble and John Lloyd examine the attitudes of the Conservative and Labour Parties to Europe, an issue which has increasingly come to dominate the domestic political agenda and which holds the key to the shape of British politics over the coming decade. ●



# Goodbye To All That

The events of 1989 marked the end of an era, of the epoch ushered in by 1917.  
**Eric Hobsbawm** looks at the meaning of 1989

**W**hat is the historical significance of 1989, the year in which communism collapsed in eastern Europe, suddenly and presumably irrevocably, anticipating the collapse of the existing regime in the USSR and the break-up of its multinational structure? Instant diagnosis is a dangerous game, almost as dangerous as instant prophecy. The only people who dive into it without hesitation are those who expect their diagnoses and prophecies to be instantly forgotten (like journalists and commentators) or not to be remembered after the next election or two (like politicians). Still, there are times when events concentrated into a short space of time, whatever we make of them, are plainly historic and immediately seen to be such. The year of the French Revolution and 1917 were such times and 1989 was equally clearly another. So what do we make of it?

It is much easier to see 1989 as a conclusion than as a beginning. It was the end of the era in which world history was about the October Revolution. For over 70 years all Western governments and ruling classes were haunted by the spectre of social revolution and communism, eventually transmuted into fear of the military power of the USSR and its potential international repercussions. Western governments are still coming to terms with the collapse of an international policy entirely designed to meet a Soviet threat, both political and military. Without the belief in such a threat Nato has no sense at all. That there was never any reality in this Western image of a Soviet Union poised