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Editorial

RENEWALS

THE LIFE-SPAN OF JOURNALS is no warrant of their achievement. A couple of issues, and abrupt extinction, can count for more in the history of a culture than a century of continuous publication. In its three years, the *Athenaeum* put German Romanticism into orbit. The fireworks of the *Revue Blanche*, the first journal of a modern avant-garde, lit Paris for barely a decade. *Lef* closed after seven issues in Moscow. These were reviews at the intersection of aesthetic innovation with philosophy and politics. Journals of criticism have often survived longer—*The Criterion*, in various incarnations, for most of the inter-war period, *Scrutiny* from the thirties into the fifties. Reasons for closure might be external, even accidental, but typically the vitality of a journal is tied to those who create it. In heroic cases, a single individual can defy time with the composition of a personal monument: Kraus writing *Die Fackel* alone for twenty-five years, Croce rivalling the feat with *La Critica*. Usually, life-cycles of journals are more adventitious and dispersed. Editors quarrel, change their minds, get bored or go bankrupt, for the most part well before they go to the grave themselves.

A political journal is as subject to the incidents of mortality as any other. In one respect, more so—since politics is always a *Kampffplatz*, a field of division, breaking ties and forcing conflicts. Wreckage through disputes or scissions is more frequent here than anywhere else. In other respects, however, political journals have a different reason for being, that makes renewal beyond their first impetus a test specific to them. They stand both for certain objective principles, and the capacity of these to decipher the course of the world. Here, editorial fade-out is intellectual defeat. Material or institutional pressures may, of course, cut off any periodical

in its prime. But short of such circumstances, political journals have no choice: to be true to themselves, they must aim to extend their real life beyond the conditions or generations that gave rise to them.

This journal, now entering its fifth decade, has reached such a point. Forty years is a significant span of activity, though not an extraordinary one—*Les Temps Modernes*, from which NLR learnt a good deal in its early days, has lasted much longer. But it is sufficient to call for an overhaul. With this issue, we start a new series of the journal marked by a break of numerals, in keeping with radical tradition, and a redesign of its appearance, in token of changes to come. Charged for the moment with the transition to another style of review, not to be achieved overnight, I set out below my own view of the situation of NLR today, and the directions it should begin to take. Billed as an ‘editorial’, the result is nonetheless a personal—and therefore provisional—statement: open to contradiction. So too will be the editorials that follow in each issue, written on topics of their choice by others, without presumption of any automatic agreement.

I

Any consideration of the future of NLR must start from its *differentia specifica*. What has made it distinctive as a journal of the Left? There would be a number of ways of answering this, but the simplest and most succinct is this. No other such review has attempted to publish across the same range of terrain—stretching from politics to economics to aesthetics to philosophy to sociology—with the same freedoms of length and detail, where required. This span has never been evenly or regularly explored, and the difficulties of moving between such completely discrepant registers of writing have consistently been scanted, to the cost of even the most patient readers. But here is where the character of *New Left Review* has effectively been defined. It is a political journal based in London that has tried to treat social and moral sciences—‘theory’, if you will—and arts and mores—‘culture’, for short—in the same historical spirit as politics itself. The best way of grasping the present situation of the review is to look back at the context in which the format of NLR was originally conceived, that made possible the combination of these interests. The conjuncture of the early sixties, when the review took shape under a new collective, offered the following features:

- ▶ Politically, a third of the planet had broken with capitalism. Few had any doubts about the enormities of Stalin's rule, or the lack of democracy in any of the countries that described themselves as socialist. But the Communist bloc, even at its moment of division, was still a dynamic reality—Isaac Deutscher, writing in *NLR*, could take the Sino-Soviet split as a sign of vitality.¹ Khrushchev, viewed as a 'revolutionary romantic' by current historians of Russia, held out promise of reform in the USSR. The prestige of Maoist China was largely intact. The Cuban Revolution was a new beacon in Latin America. The Vietnamese were successfully fighting the United States in South-East Asia. Capitalism, however stable and prosperous in its Northern heartlands, was—and felt itself to be—under threat across the larger part of the world outside them. Even at home, in Western Europe and Japan, mass Communist movements were still ranged against the existing order.

- ▶ Intellectually, the discredit of Stalinist orthodoxy after 1956 and the decline of domestic Cold War conformity after 1958 released a discovery process of suppressed leftist and Marxist traditions that, in starved British conditions, took on aspects of a theoretical fever. Alternative strands of a revolutionary Marxism linked to mass politics—Luxemburgist, Trotskyist, Maoist, Council Communist—started to circulate. Simultaneously, the various legacies of a Western Marxism born from the defeat of mass politics—from the era of Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci onwards—became available for recovery. Crucial to the influence of these Western traditions was its continuity into the present: Sartre, Lefebvre, Adorno, Marcuse, Della Volpe, Colletti, Althusser were contemporary authors, producing new texts as *NLR* was sending its numbers to press. British isolation from such continental patterns made sudden, concentrated encounter with them all the headier.

- ▶ Culturally, exit from the conformist atmosphere of the fifties was a much broader phenomenon than this, and the rupture just as abrupt. The two dominant markers of the period were the emergence of rock music as a pervasive sound-wave of youth revolt, in contrast to the generally saccharine output of the previous period—a popular form laying claim to both aesthetic breakthrough and social upsurge.

¹ 'Three Currents in Communism', *NLR* 23, Jan–Feb 1964.

Britain was itself the leading country in this transformation, whose shock-effects were not yet routinized, as they later became. The second critical shift was the emergence of *auteur* cinema, as conception and project. Here the influence of *Cahiers du Cinema* and the *Nouvelle Vague* that came out of it was decisive. In this reception, the position accorded classic Hollywood directors by French cineastes opened a loop that defined much of the period. In effect, the new ascendance of cinema and music set free a dialectic between ‘high’ and ‘low’ planes of reference in the cultural life of the sixties that looks retrospectively distinctive. Playful or serious, the ease of traffic between the two—an absence of strain—owed much to the most important theoretical current of the time, aside from Marxism, which was structuralism. The moment of the early Barthes or Lévi-Strauss (*Mythologies* or *Tristes Tropiques*), bringing a common method to the study of each, was critical for the mediation between high and low forms. Recuperating the legacy of Russian formalism, this was a structuralism whose concerns were still perfectly congruent with those of the cultural Left.

2

In this triple context, NLR undertook a range of programmes that at the time were innovatory for the English-speaking world. Politically, the review set its compass towards anti-imperialist movements in the Third World, and while parochial reflexes were still strong on the British Left, gathered a team whose interests eventually spanned most of the world—Latin America, Black Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East were all represented. At home, a set of distinctive arguments about the UK was developed, which came to have a certain influence. So when the explosion of the late sixties, triggered by the war in Vietnam, occurred in the West—first student rebellion, then labour upsurge—NLR was well placed to play some role in the ensuing tumult, and to gain an international readership by the mid-seventies.

Intellectually, the journal devoted much of its energies to the introduction and critical reception of the different schools of Western Marxist thought, a sufficiently large enterprise to occupy it for over a decade. Structuralism, formalism, psychoanalysis featured too—canonical texts or sources often first surfacing in its pages. On these fronts NLR was well ahead of the surrounding culture, pioneering a more cosmopolitan

and radical horizon of reference than was easily available elsewhere in the Anglophone world.

Culturally, too, the review developed new styles of intervention, linking interest in traditional arts to engagement with avant-garde forms, and interventions on popular cinema or music. Peter Wollen's famous series on film directors, or—say—Franco Moretti's 'Dialectic of Fear', exemplified the freedom of movement between 'high' and 'low' terrains. The initiatives released by this ferment escaped narrow classification. NLR was premonitory both of the seventies' rediscovery of feminism, and the eighties' rediscovery of work, in the same few years. It was a creative period.

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Four decades later, the environment in which NLR took shape has all but completely passed away. The Soviet bloc has disappeared. Socialism has ceased to be a widespread ideal. Marxism is no longer a dominant in the culture of the Left. Even Labourism has largely dissolved. To say that these changes are enormous would be an under-statement. It cannot be maintained they reduced the review to silence. Each in their fashion, writers associated with it have responded with spirit to the conjuncture of '89. Texts in different registers would include Robin Blackburn's 'Fin-de-Siècle: Socialism After the Crash'; Peter Wollen's 'Our Post-Communism: The Legacy of Karl Kautsky'; Alexander Cockburn's *The Golden Age is Within Us*; Fred Halliday's 'The Ends of Cold War'; Tom Nairn's *Faces of Nationalism*; Benedict Anderson's 'Radicalism after Communism'; Tariq Ali's *Fear of Mirrors*; and the list could be lengthened.² It would be interesting to trace the variety of these reactions, and of other contributors published by the review. Judgements of each will differ. But as a whole the tradition of the journal acquitted itself without dishonour.

Ten years after the collapse of Communism, however, the world has moved on, and a condition of re-launching the review is some distinc-

² Respectively: NLR 185, Jan–Feb 1991 (Blackburn); NLR 202, Nov–Dec 1993 (Wollen); Verso 1994 (Cockburn); NLR 180, Mar–Apr 1990 (Halliday); Verso 1997 (Nairn); NLR 202, Nov–Dec 1993 (Anderson); Arcadia 1998 (Ali).

tive and systematic approach to its state today. What is the principal aspect of the past decade? Put briefly, it can be defined as the virtually uncontested consolidation, and universal diffusion, of neo-liberalism. This was not so widely predicted. If the years 1989–91 saw the destruction of Soviet-bloc Communism, it was not immediately obvious—even to its champions—that unfettered free-market capitalism would sweep the board in East or West. Many East European dissidents, West European progressives, North American conservatives, foresaw some kind of ‘re-balancing’ of the global landscape—the Left perhaps gaining a fresh lease of life, once released from the crippling moral legacy of Stalinism, and Japanese or Rhenish corporatism proving superior in both social equity and economic efficiency to Wall Street or the City. These were not isolated beliefs, and could draw on authorities of distinction. As late as 1998, Eric Hobsbawm and former *Marxism Today* writers were still hopefully proclaiming the end of neo-liberalism.³

In fact, the trend of the time has moved in the opposite direction. Five inter-linked developments have changed the scene quite drastically:

- ▶ American capitalism has resoundingly re-asserted its primacy in all fields—economic, political, military, cultural—with an unprecedented eight-year boom. However inflated are asset values on Wall Street, burdened with debt private households, or large the current trade deficits, there is little doubt that the underlying competitive position of US business has been critically strengthened.
- ▶ European social-democracy, having taken power across the Union, has responded to continent-wide slow growth and high unemployment by across-the-board moves towards an American model—accelerating deregulation and privatization not only of industries but also social services, often well beyond the limits of previous conservative regimes. Britain had a head-start in deregulation, but Germany and Italy are now bidding to catch up, and France lags more in words than deeds.
- ▶ Japanese capitalism has fallen into a deep slump, and—along with Korean—is being gradually pressured to submit to deregulatory standards, with increasing unemployment. Elsewhere in Asia, the

³ ‘The Death of Neo-Liberalism’, *Marxism Today* one-issue revenant, Nov–Dec 1998.

PRC is eager to enter the WTO at virtually any price, in the hope that competitive pressures from foreign capital will weed out state industries, without having itself to take responsibility for their fate; while India is for the first time now willingly dependent on the IMF.

- ▶ The new Russian economy, the weakest link in the global market system, has provoked no popular backlash, despite catastrophic regression in productive output and life-expectation. Stabilization of its financial oligarchy under a plebiscitary leadership, capable of centralizing power and privatizing land, is now in prospect.

These are massive socio-economic changes, working their way across the globe, which have already found canonization in Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw's enthusiastic survey *The Commanding Heights*. They have been accompanied by two complementary, political and military, shifts:

- ▶ Ideologically, the neo-liberal consensus has found a new point of stabilization in the 'Third Way' of the Clinton–Blair regimes. The winning formula to seal the victory of the market is not to attack, but to preserve, the placebo of a compassionate public authority, extolling the compatibility of competition with solidarity. The hard core of government policies remains further pursuit of the Reagan–Thatcher legacy, on occasion with measures their predecessors did not dare enact: welfare reform in the US, student fees in the UK. But it is now carefully surrounded with subsidiary concessions and softer rhetoric. The effect of this combination, currently being diffused throughout Europe, is to suppress the conflictual potential of the pioneering regimes of the radical right, and kill off opposition to neo-liberal hegemony more completely. One might say that, by definition, TINA only acquires full force once an alternative regime demonstrates that there are truly no alternative policies. For the quietus to European social-democracy or the memory of the New Deal to be consummated, governments of the Centre-Left were indispensable. In this sense, adapting Lenin's maxim that 'the democratic republic is the ideal political shell of capitalism', we could say that the Third Way is the best ideological shell of neo-liberalism today. It is scarcely an accident that the most ambitious and intransigent theorization of ultra-capitalism as a global order, Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive-Tree*, should at the same time be a brazen paean to US world hegemony,

and an unconditional advocacy of Clintonism, under the slogan ‘one dare not be a globalizer today without being a social-democrat’.⁴

- Finally, the Balkan War has rounded off the decade with a military-diplomatic demonstration of the ascendancy of this constellation. Comparison with the Gulf War suggests how much stronger the New World Order has become since the early nineties. Bush had to mobilize a vast army to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in the name of protecting Western oil supplies and a feudal dynasty; without succeeding in either overthrowing the regime in Baghdad, or drawing Russia—still unpredictable—into the alliance against it. Clinton has bombed Serbia into submission without so much as a soldier having to fire a shot, in the name of a moral imperative to stop ethnic cleansing, that is likely to conclude in short order with a removal of the regime in Belgrade; and brigaded Russia effortlessly into the occupation force as a token auxiliary. Meanwhile China, after the destruction of its embassy—on the heels of a respectful visit by its Premier to the US—has cooperated meekly in setting up a UN screen for the NATO protectorate in Kosovo, and made clear that nothing will be allowed to disturb good relations with Washington. For its part, the European Union is basking in a new comradeship-in-arms with the United States, and joint purpose in generous reconstruction of the Balkans. Victory in Kosovo has in this sense not been just military and political. It is also an ideological triumph, that sets a new standard for interventions on behalf of human rights—as construed in Washington: Chechens or Palestinians need not apply—around the world. The society created by the capitalist free-for-all of the past twenty years was in need of a good conscience. Operation Allied Force has provided it.

4

The intellectual atmosphere in the advanced countries, and extending well beyond them, reflects these changes. If the bulk of the Western intelligentsia was always substantially satisfied with the status quo, with

⁴ *The Lexus and Olive-Tree*, New York 1999, p. 354. In similar vein, Yergin and Stanislaw end their glowing tour of the world-wide triumph of markets with a concluding homage to Blair’s ‘great accomplishment in fusing social-democratic values of fairness and inclusiveness with the Thatcherite economic programme’: *The Commanding Heights*, New York 1999, p. 390.

a more restless and imaginative minority flanking it to the right, the left was still a significant presence in most of the leading capitalist states down through the eighties, even if there were important national variations—the British becoming less conservative, as the French or Italians became more so, and so forth. With the homogenization of the political scene in the nineties, one would expect there to have been a *Gleichschaltung* of acceptable opinion as well. By the end of the decade, this has gathered pace. If we look at the spectrum of what was the traditional—formerly socialist—Left, two types of reaction to the new conjuncture predominate.

The first is accommodation. In its hour of general triumph, capitalism has convinced many who at one time believed it an avoidable evil that it is a necessary and on balance salutary social order. Those who have rallied, explicitly or tacitly, to the Third Way are obvious examples. But the range of guises in which accommodation can be reached are much wider, and are quite compatible with a sceptical or even derisive view of official—Blumenthal–Campbell—oleographs of the new order: extending from frank acknowledgement of a down-the-line superiority of private enterprise, without mollifying embellishments, to simple dropping of the subject of property regimes altogether. One consequence of the shift in the ideological climate at large is that it becomes decreasingly necessary even to express a position on these issues, as they fall outside the perimeter of significant debate. Clamorous renegacy is quite rare; the commoner pattern is just changing the subject. But the depth of actual accommodation can be seen from episodes like the Balkan War, where the role of NATO was simply taken for granted, as a normal and desirable part of the political universe, by a wide band of opinion that would not have dreamt of doing so ten or twenty years back. The underlying attitude is: capitalism has come to stay, we must make our peace with it.

The second type of reaction can best be described as one of consolation.⁵ Here there is no unprincipled accommodation—earlier ideals are not abandoned, and may even be staunchly reaffirmed. But faced with

⁵ It is a matter of logic that there is a third possible reaction to the turn of the time, that is neither accommodation or consolation: namely, resignation—in other words, a lucid recognition of the nature and triumph of the system, without either adaptation or self-deception, but also without any belief in the chance of an alternative to it. A bitter conclusion of this kind is, however, rarely articulated as a public position.

daunting odds, there is a natural human tendency to try and find silver linings in what would otherwise seem an overwhelmingly hostile environment. The need to have some message of hope induces a propensity to over-estimate the significance of contrary processes, to invest inappropriate agencies with disinterested potentials, to nourish illusions in imaginary forces. Probably none of us on the Left is immune to this temptation, which can even claim some warrant from the general rule of the unintended consequences flowing from any historical transformation—the dialectical sense in which victories can unexpectedly generate victors over them. It is also true that no political movement can survive without offering some measure of emotional relief to its adherents, which in periods of defeat will inevitably involve elements of psychological compensation. But an intellectual journal has other duties. Its first commitment must be to an accurate description of the world, no matter what its bearing on morale may be. All the more so, because there is an intermediate terrain in which consolation and accommodation can overlap—that is, wherever changes in the established order calculated to fortify its hold are greeted as steps towards its loosening, or perhaps even a qualitative transformation of the system. Russell Jacoby's recent *End of Utopia* offers trenchant reflections on some of this.

5

What kind of stance should NLR adopt in this new situation? Its general approach, I believe, should be an uncompromising realism. Uncompromising in both senses: refusing any accommodation with the ruling system, and rejecting every piety and euphemism that would understate its power. No sterile maximalism follows. The journal should always be in sympathy with strivings for a better life, no matter how modest their scope. But it can support any local movements or limited reforms, without pretending that they alter the nature of the system. What it cannot—or should not—do is either lend credence to illusions that the system is moving in a steadily progressive direction, or sustain conformist myths that it urgently needs to be shielded from reactionary forces: attitudes on display, to take two recent examples, in the rallying to Princess and President by the *bien-pensant* left, as if the British monarchy needed to be more popular or the American Presidency more protected. Hysteria of this kind should be sharply attacked.

Appeals to venerable traditions or established institutions to—so to speak—live up to their own standards, form a different sort of case. A great deal of the best writing on the Left today seeks to take the ruling conventions at their word—treating official hypocrisy, the gap between word and deed, as the homage vice must pay to virtue, that promises a happy ending. This was the approach classically favoured, and eloquently practised, by the first New Left. Many contributions to the journal will continue to be couched in these terms, and should be judged on their—often considerable—merits. There is, however, a risk in this style of address. The line between the desirable and the feasible may be left unclear, allowing mystification about the realities of power, and what can rationally be expected of it. It is best to leave no ambiguity here. The test of NLR's capacity to strike a distinctive political note should be how often it can calmly shock readers by calling a spade a spade, rather than falling in with well-meaning cant or self-deception on the Left. The spirit of the Enlightenment rather than the Evangelicals is what is most needed today.

6

A decade does not make an epoch. The neo-liberal grand slam of the nineties is no guarantee of perpetual power. In a longer historical perspective, a more sanguine reading of the time can be made. This, after all, has also been a period in which the Suharto dictatorship has been overthrown in Indonesia, clerical tyranny weakened in Iran, a venal oligarchy ousted in Venezuela, apartheid ended in South Africa, assorted generals and their civilian relays brought low in Korea, liberation finally won in East Timor. These were not movements that enjoyed the confidence of investors in the West, as the spring-time of peoples in Europe had done. An optimistic view would take them as the seeds of a reckoning to come—the latest acts of a continuing emancipation of nations that constitutes the real process of democratization on a world scale, whose outcome we can barely yet imagine. Another version would point rather to the general weakening in the hierarchy of the sexes, with world-wide pressures for women's emancipation, as the leading story of the age; or to the growth in ecological consciousness, to which even the most hardened states must now pay formal respect. Common to all these visions is an intimation that capitalism may be invincible, but might

eventually prove soluble—or forgettable—in the waters of profounder kinds of equality, sustainability and self-determination.

If so, such depths still remain unfathomable. The spread of democracy as a substitute for socialism, as hope or claim, is mocked by the hollowing of democracy itself in its capitalist homelands, not to speak of its post-communist adjuncts: steadily falling rates of electoral participation, increasing financial corruption, deadening mediatization. In general, what is strong is not democratic aspiration from below, but the asphyxiation of public debate and political difference by capital above. The force of this order lies not in repression, but dilution and neutralization; and so far, it has handled its newer challenges with equanimity. The gains made by the feminist and ecological movements in the advanced world are real and welcome: the most important elements of human progress in these societies of the last thirty years. But to date they have proved compatible with the routines of accumulation. Logically, a good measure of political normalization has followed. The performance of feminists in the United States, and Greens in Germany—where each movement is strongest—in the service of Clinton's regimen in the White House and NATO's war in the Balkans speaks for itself.

This is not to say that any other force in the advanced capitalist countries has shown a greater quotient of effective antagonism to the status quo. With rare exceptions—France in the winter of 1995—labour has been quiescent for over twenty years now. Its condition is not a mere outcome of economic changes or ideological shifts. Harsh class struggles were necessary to subdue it in Britain as the United States. If somewhat less cowed in Europe, workers still remain everywhere on the defensive. The only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historical defeat. Capital has comprehensively beaten back all threats to its rule, the bases of whose power—above all, the pressures of competition—were persistently under-estimated by the socialist movement. The doctrines of the Right that have theorized capitalism as a systemic order retain their tough-minded strength; current attempts by a self-styled radical Centre to dress up its realities are by comparison little more than weak public relations. Those who always believed in the over-riding value of free markets and private ownership of the means of production include many figures of intellectual substance. The recent crop of bowdlerizers and beauticians, who only yesterday deplored the ugliness of the system they primp today, do not.

For the Left, the lesson of the past century is one taught by Marx. Its first task is to attend to the actual development of capitalism as a complex machinery of production and profit, in constant motion. Robert Brenner's 'Economics of Global Turbulence', taking up an issue of NLR, sets the appropriate example.⁶ No collective agency able to match the power of capital is yet on the horizon. We are in a time, as genetic engineering looms, when the only revolutionary force at present capable of disturbing its equilibrium appears to be scientific progress itself—the forces of production, so unpopular with Marxists convinced of the primacy of relations of production when a socialist movement was still alive. But if the human energies for a change of system are ever released again, it will be from within the metabolism of capital itself. We cannot turn away from it. Only in the evolution of this order could lie the secrets of another one. This is the sense of enquiries like those by Robin Blackburn in NLR into the trend of financial institutions.⁷ There are no certainties here; so far, all that is possible are proposals and conjectures.

7

Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view. It can be put like this. For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions—that is, systematic rival outlooks—within the thought-world of the West; and scarcely any on a world scale either, if we discount religious doctrines as largely inoperative archaisms, as the experiences of Poland or Iran indicate we may. Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history. What this means for a journal like NLR is a radical discontinuity in the culture of the Left, as it—or if it—renews itself generationally. Nowhere is the contrast with the originating context of the review sharper than in this respect. Virtually the entire horizon of reference in which the generation of the sixties grew up has been wiped away—the landmarks of reformist and revolutionary socialism in equal measure. For most students, the roster of Bebel, Bernstein, Luxemburg, Kautsky, Jaurès, Lukács, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci have become names as remote as a list of Arian bishops. How to reweave threads of significance

⁶ NLR 229, May–June 1998; an expanded version will appear as a Verso book.

⁷ 'The New Collectivism', NLR 233, Jan–Feb 1999.

between the last century and this would be one of the most delicate and difficult tasks before any journal that took the term 'left' seriously. There seem to be few guide-posts for it.

If we look at the intellectual traditions closest in time and influence to the early NLR, the situation does not at first look much better. Most of the corpus of Western Marxism has also gone out of general circulation—Korsch, the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, most of Sartre and Althusser, the Della Volpean school, Marcuse. What has survived best is least directly political: essentially, post-war Frankfurt theory and selected Benjamin. Domestically, Raymond Williams has been put out of court, much as Wright Mills in America twenty years ago; Deutscher has disappeared; the name Miliband speaks of another time.

On the other hand, the history of ideas is not a Darwinian process. Major systems of thought rarely disappear, as if they were so many species become extinct. Though no longer seen within any coherent context, strands of these traditions have continued to show remarkable vitality. It could be said that British Marxist historiography has now achieved a world readership, something it never knew before, with Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*—which seems likely to remain the most influential single interpretation of the past century well into this one, as the overall history of a victory from the viewpoint of the vanquished. Jameson's work on the postmodern, descending directly from Continental Marxism, has no exact counterpart as a cultural version of the age. Robert Brenner has provided the only coherent economic account of capitalist development since the Second World War, Giovanni Arrighi the most ambitious projection of its evolution in a longer timeframe. Tom Nairn and Benedict Anderson are leading voices on the political ambiguities of modern nationalism. Régis Debray has developed one of the most systematic theories of the contemporary media now on offer. Terry Eagleton in the literary field, T. J. Clark in the visual arts, David Harvey in the reconstruction of geography, are central figures for all concerned with these disciplines.

It is enough to list such names to see that no forcible unification of them into a single paradigm is conceivable. The span of different methods, interests and accents is far too wide. If that is in part a consequence of the fragmentation of the culture of the Left, it is also an expression of a creative disinhibition and diversification of lines of enquiry. Respect-

ing these, the review should seek to present an intelligible landscape, in which such bodies of work have an accessible relationship to one another.

At the same time, there is a wider intellectual spectrum with few or no Marxist origins, defining itself as loosely on the left, that is in movement today. Taking the fields of philosophy, sociology and economics, it would include the work of Habermas, Derrida, Barry; Bourdieu, Mann, Runciman; Stiglitz, Sen, Dasgupta. Here criss-crossing shifts of position can be seen, previously moderate thinkers becoming radicalized as neo-liberal hegemony has become more absolute, while others once more radical have become reconciled to elements of the conventional wisdom. But more significant than these eddies is a common feature of much of this range of work: the combination of bold intellectual ambition and broad disciplinary synthesis with timorous or truistic commitments in the political field itself—a far cry from the robust and passionate world of Weber, Keynes or Russell. Here the consequences of the uprooting of all the continuities of a socialist tradition, however indirectly related to, are very visible. The result is typically a spectacle of impressive theoretical energy and productivity, whose social sum is significantly less than its intellectual parts.

By contrast, commanding the field of direct political constructions of the time, the Right has provided one fluent vision of where the world is going, or has stopped, after another—Fukuyama, Brzezinski, Huntington, Yergin, Luttwak, Friedman. These are writers that unite a single powerful thesis with a fluent popular style, designed not for an academic readership but a broad international public. This confident genre, of which America has so far a virtual monopoly, finds no equivalent on the Left. There, at best, normative schemes of a ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ or ‘law of peoples’, bracketing or euphemizing the actual course of things, remain the lame alternative. NLR has not engaged much with either. This ought to be one of its priorities. It is unlikely the balance of intellectual advantage will alter greatly before there is a change in the political correlation of forces, which will probably remain stable so long as there is no deep economic crisis in the West. Little short of a slump of inter-war proportions looks capable of shaking the parameters of the current consensus. But that is no reason to mark time—polemical or analytical—in the interim.

The cultural scene, too, bears little resemblance to that in which the early NLR flourished. Three major changes have defined the interval. First, there has been a massive displacement of dominance from verbal to visual codes, with the primacy of television over every preceding means of communication, followed by the rise of subsequent electronic media in which the same shift has been technologically replicated. This pattern has, of course, defined the arrival of postmodern forms at large. Secondly—another hallmark of the latter—most of the tension between deviant or insurgent impulses from below and the established order above has been absorbed, as the market has appropriated and institutionalized youth culture in much the same way it earlier encapsulated avant-garde practices: but—this being a mass market—much more thoroughly. The commodity apotheosis of idols like Jackson or Jordan are the upshot. Thirdly, the voltage connecting high and low systems, whose circuit was such a feature of the modern period, has been shorted as the distance that was a condition of it has tended to collapse. The effect is mutual caricature, as the two converge on common terrain: slumming at the Royal Academy, and pretention at the Oscars—*Sensation* and Dreamworks as obverse forms of kitsch. Literature, dragged into the same vortex by prize-money and publicity budgets, generates Eco or late Rushdie.

For the journal, it is the critical side of the situation that matters. Here the pattern on the side of production has been inverted. Where once there was lively interchange between high and low levels, a polarization has occurred that tends to leave each sealed in hypertrophied discourses of their own. Thus high forms have fallen prey to tortuous routines of philosophical deconstruction, while popular forms have become the playground of ‘cultural studies’ of a sub-sociological type. Each has origins in radical lines of work in the late fifties and sixties: Hoggart and Williams on one side, Bataille to Derrida on the other. Formally speaking, the respective mutations continue to identify themselves, for the most part, with the Left: indeed, in grander moments—as critics on the Right are quick to point out—virtually *as* the Left, at any rate in America. What they too often amount to, however, is a choice between obscurantism and populism, or—still worse—a mixture of the two, parading a weird blend of the demagogic and apolitical.

Obscurantism as wilful impediment of meaning has few defenders. Populism, on the other hand, is sometimes thought to have progressive potential. But if we set aside its legendary origins in Russia, where the Narodniks would be regarded by current standards as thoroughly elitist, what populism typically means today is faking an equality of condition—between voters, readers or viewers—that does not exist, the better to pass over actual inequalities of knowledge or literacy: ground on which a cynical right and pious left all too easily meet. It is thus not surprising that of the two hermeneutics on offer, cultural studies is currently the more influential, and in its deteriorated forms the main obstacle to any recreation of an unselfconscious sense of movement between high and low. Commendable exercises in the analysis of mass culture are not lacking, in which the original intentions behind the Hoggart–Williams line have continued. All too many, however, of the progeny of the Birmingham School have lurched towards an uncritical embrace of the market as zestful fount of popular culture. In these conditions, the role of NLR should be to bend the stick resolutely in the opposite direction, while avoiding any neo-Leavisite overtones. Julian Stallabrass’s contributions to the review have struck a requisite note, engaging critically both with the newest electronic media, at the level of the games arcade, and with the newest British painting, as it—in every sense—plays to the gallery.

In any radical journal, tension is always likely between two forms of criticism, equally necessary yet markedly distinct. One can think of these as, roughly speaking, ‘avant-garde’ and ‘hegelian’ approaches to culture—the first committed to staking out an aggressive, even if one-sided imperative stance, the second to deciphering in more indicative mood the historical or philosophical intelligibility of a wider scene: Clement Greenberg and Fredric Jameson as respective virtuosos. The two styles are not exclusive, and the review should encourage both. The need for one or the other varies, inevitably, according to topic or conjuncture. In an area like the cinema, earnest reflections on the meaning of the latest box-office hit from Hollywood or Elstree, even if well-aimed, are a waste of NLR’s space, compared with treatment of directors, above all outside the Anglophone world, who are short of attention or difficult to see. For, counter-balancing the negative developments in the metropolitan zone of the past period, there has been one enormous cultural gain at large—the multiplication of peripheral producers in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America. This is very poorly covered in the West, and should be a priority for the Left to address. One good text on Hou Xiao Xien,

Kiarostami, Sembene, Leduc is worth a hundred—no matter how critical—on Spielberg or Coppola. A sequence along these lines, extended to the new European cinema (Amelio, Reitz, Jacquot, Zonka), would be the natural successor to Peter Wollen's path-breaking series in the early NLR.

More generally, the kind of literary geography Franco Moretti has been developing, because it focuses on the market as well as the morphology of forms, provides a natural bridge between elite and mass zones of culture, as well as, most recently, an 'outward turn' to global systems that offers a model of another kind. In all fields, NLR should try to counter the provincialism—actually, narcissism—of the English-speaking world, by focusing, if necessary more than proportionately, on non-Anglophone works and producers. One of the most striking features of the current English scene (*a fortiori* American too) is that although foreign languages, literatures and politics are much more widely learnt in schools and universities than they were twenty years ago, the cultural references of the newest generations—even at their most sophisticated—are often narrower, because the hegemony of Hollywood, CNN and Bookerism has increased exponentially in the interim. A glance at the slipstream of current journalistic fashions is enough to register the paradox. In keeping with its tradition, the review should resist this involution.

9

Editing a journal with this set of concerns has always been a tightrope affair. To achieve a balance between such disparate fields as the economic and the aesthetic, the sociological and the philosophical, would be tricky enough in itself. Here they come together, by the nature of the review, under the primacy of the political, that poses its own problems of definition and selection. The order of the journal tacitly reflects its organizing focus, editorials or lead articles normally dealing with international issues of the day. NLR remains first and foremost a political journal, outside any polite consensus or established perimeters of opinion. But this is not a politics that absorbs the domains it touches on. The culture of any society always exceeds the spectrum of politics active within it, as a reservoir of meanings of which only a delimited range have to do with the distribution of power, that is the object of political

action.⁸ An effective politics respects that excess. Attempts to conscript any theoretical or cultural field for instrumental purposes will always be futile or counter-productive. That does not mean indifference. The Left needs a 'cultural politics'; but what that signifies first of all is a widening of the limits of its own culture. It follows that NLR will publish articles regardless of their immediate relationship, or lack of it, to familiar radical agendas.

A major change of the past epoch, often remarked upon, has been the widespread migration of intellectuals of the Left into institutions of higher learning. This development—a consequence not only of changes in occupational structure, but of the emptying-out of political organizations, the dumbing-down of publishing houses, the stunting of counter-cultures—is unlikely to be soon reversed. It has brought with it, notoriously, specific tares. Edward Said has recently drawn attention sharply to some of the worst of these—standards of writing that would have left Marx or Morris speechless. But academization has taken its toll in other ways too: needless apparatuses, more for credential than intellectual purposes, circular references to authorities, complaisant self-citations, and so on. Wherever appropriate, NLR aims to be a scholarly journal; but not an academic one. Unlike most academic—not to speak of other—journals today, it does not shove notes to the end of articles, or resort to sub-literate 'Harvard' references, but respects the classical courtesy of footnotes at the bottom of the page, as indicators of sources or tangents to the text, immediately available to the reader. Where they are necessary, authors can be as free with them as Moretti is in this issue. But mere proliferation for its own sake, a plague of too many submissions today, will not pass. It should be a matter of honour on the Left to write at least as well, without redundancy or clutter, as its adversaries.

The journal will feature a regular book-review section, and encourage polemical exchange. NLR has always enjoyed an undeserved comparative advantage in the language in which it is published, since English has a world-wide audience that no other idiom possesses. By way of compensation, it should try to bring to the notice of its readers important works that are not published in English, as well as those that are. The

⁸ The outstanding argument for the asymmetry of culture and politics is to be found in Francis Mulhern, *The Present Lasts a Long Time*, Cork 1998, pp. 6–7, 52–53, a book to which the review will return in a forthcoming issue.

reviews in this issue offer an improvised sample of what we might do. Of polemics in its pages, the journal has traditionally had too few. We hope to change this. The current number contains a pair, as will the next. Here, as elsewhere, the criterion is not political correctness, however construed, but originality and vigour of argument. There is no requirement of contributors that they be conventionally of the Left—there are many areas, perhaps especially in the field of international relations, where arguments against standard progressive pieties, usually shared by pillars of respectable liberalism, are superior to them. The most devastating criticisms of the expansion of NATO and the war in the Balkans often came from the Right. The review should welcome interventions like these. By contrast, surplus to requirements are apologia for official policies from the Left, of which quite a few were to be heard as the B-52s took off for Kuwait or Kosovo. These are available any day in the establishment press. The value of polemical exchange here should be to lie clear of this chloroformed zone.

Finally, a word on location. NLR was a journal conceived in Britain, a state we must hope will not last much longer, for the reasons trenchantly set out by Tom Nairn. It has had much to say about the UK, and will not stop now. At the same time, many of its editors today live or work in the US, about which the journal has also published a good deal. Over two decades, writing on America by Mike Davis—its most consistent contributor—has left an indelible mark. There is also the European background that stimulated most of the initiating ideas of the review. The scope of NLR has always been wider than this Western base-line. But while the journal has covered the rest of the world—Third and Second, as well as First, while these terms still held—for better or worse according to period, its writers have continued to come essentially from its homelands. This we would like to change. The time should come when the contributors to NLR are as extra-Atlantic as its contents. For the moment, that is out of reach. But it is a horizon to bear in mind.