

# BEYOND SANCTION

As if in a gesture of Extreme Unction for ALR, this week I received an unsolicited copy of *Eureka Street* in the mail.

I was one of the subscribers to the now defunct *Modern Times* and became, by default, a subscriber to this well-produced and worthy journal. I wish it well. I have always been a great admirer of the Society of Jesus. Its founder Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* should be required reading for everyone involved in plausible politics, policy formation and questions of ethical conduct. As Roland Barthes put it: "the language of interrogation developed by Ignatius is aimed less at the classical question of consultations: *What to do?* than at the dramatic alternative by which finally every practice is prepared and determined: *To do this or to do that?*". Not inappropriate questions, I would have thought, either in the immediate context of a federal election or, more importantly, in framing the sorts of questions that need to be posed about the logics of contemporary politics and political culture and how we—construe that 'we' widely—approach those logics.

But I probably won't renew my subscription to *Eureka Street* when it falls due. Like *Modern Times* and, much more stridently, the new *Arena Magazine* (which has its own jesuitical ethos), *Eureka Street* is organised around the question of "What to do?" or, in a different but not unrelated ethos which will evoke both fond and fearful memories in many an activist: *What is to be done?* Reading a piece in one of these magazines is usually marked by expressions of 'mmm...yes...what a disgrace, or what joy...' But then what? Very few journals or magazines in the 'non-commercial' circuit have been able to move beyond this threshold and not look like the quarterly newsletter of the Office of Local Government. *ALR* was one of them.

The great value of *ALR* over the past five years or so was to shift the register and complicate the questions: questions not so much of this or that as of this and that; questions not of market or community but their necessary interrelations;

questions not of public or private but of their variable historical and contemporary thresholds; questions not of workers or consumers, but both at the same time. I don't know of any other magazine which has been doing this systematically. We're talking here not simply about magazine and journal culture, but also about a political environment in which most that is solid has melted into air. *ALR* captured some of the process and shapes of that melting without undue despair and with a positive orientation.

When I left the UK in 1984, *Marxism Today* was steadily building its high ground as the left journal of opinion: a position it maintained for some time. It informed some of the workings of the Kinnock 'kitchen cabinet' (to no avail apparently) and provided a forum for some very exciting 'revisionist' left opinion to the extent, thank God, that the word 'revisionist' disappeared. The early *Marxism Today* was boring but transformed itself into something else and eventually died in the process. This was a pity. The analogous demise of *ALR* will also be a pity, but perhaps not so terminal.

The problem is that both were born as specific vehicles and genres, as journals directed to education and the encouragement of a higher level of debate (beyond the exigencies of day to day activism) for political cadres. Their spilling into the mass market, such as it was, was more often accidental than a matter of policy, at least in the earlier stages. Their marketing and distribution strategies had been based on the commitment of political cadres at meetings, street corners, political events and through minimal but secure distribution networks. When they moved beyond this framework they met problems.

*ALR's* requirements have always been determined by the prior (but residual) constraints of its political history as an 'organ'. Now that almost every non-theocratic country in the world has

moved beyond the idea of a 'mass party', the organ is not really a terribly useful appendage. Political parties with even the slightest pretension to government are becoming smaller, not larger. Movements are becoming more specialised and the term 'mass movement' has almost disappeared from the political lexicon.

It is manifestly difficult to maintain a relatively specialised magazine on a commercial basis in a large country with a small population. Even more difficult when that magazine has to move, realistically and pragmatically, beyond the relatively guaranteed institutional audience of the political party or movement and beyond a sanctioned or delegated responsibility to that institutional form. *ALR* had been doing this for a while and the tensions were beginning to show.

There is now no place for a viable sanctioned journal of left opinion, commentary and critique in Australia, for the simple fact that there is no one agency capable of providing the authoritative or financial basis for that sanction. The idea of a magazine working directly according to the logic of educative influence has run its course. This is not a libertarian argument, it's simply a recognition of two factors. First, that audiences matter; second, that the political landscape has been massively and rapidly transformed by global and national events and influences. At first, *ALR* sat nicely in the cracks caused by this transformation and indeed helped to open a few itself. But then it slipped through.

Coming, as it does, less than six months after the demise of *Modern Times*, this leaves Australian independent publishing significantly impoverished in ways that neither *Eureka Street* nor *Arena Magazine* will be able to compensate for. But if it makes us think about what genres and forms of communication are now appropriate to diverse audiences, then the demise of *ALR* may hopefully lead, a little way down the track, to a significant recasting of forms of communication and address, which undoubtedly remain vital to political culture. Maybe the results of the election will sharpen our minds on this. ■

COLIN MERCER teaches in Humanities at Griffith University. He has been a member of *ALR's* Brisbane collective/editorial board since 1987.