

ALR

MARGINS

Happy Birthday to Us

For someone in their seventies like me, ten years ago seems just like yesterday. Even 25 years ago seems as recent as the week before last. And the changes in the 25 years since *ALR* first appeared have been enormous.

When *ALR* began publication in June/July 1966 those involved in the new project had what seemed to them at the time a pretty clear purpose and agenda. It was one which became clearer still when the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia two years later imposed a 20 year long winter after the brief Prague Spring.

Today it is far more difficult to define *ALR's* agenda and purpose because the political, ideological and theoretical terrain in which it operates has been transformed by a combination of slow changes and political earthquakes.

Twenty-five years ago we were being driven by the new moods and movements of the 60s which rubbed abrasively against the marxism we espoused, and by the split between the Soviet Union and China. We were then breaking decisively, if somewhat belatedly, with stalinism. We wanted to overcome the sectarian distrust of other forces on the Left which had so often plagued us, and to recognise how inappropriate was our assumption that we possessed a knowledge inherently superior to anyone else's. In *ALR* no subject was regarded as 'beyond the pale' as had been the case before.

Our critique of Soviet society became wide-ranging. But it was mainly a criticism of the nature of the political system. We were aware of some of its grave economic problems but still felt that the basis of the economy was sound, and that once political barriers were removed, solutions to economic problems would somehow naturally follow.

It was not until 1989—when the power of the people in Eastern Europe and the progress (even if erratic) of glasnost in the Soviet Union revealed the depth and extent of the economic crisis of these countries and the degree of corruption and environmental degradation it had been responsible for—that it was fully brought home that there were yet more fundamental problems than we had ever realised in the socialist project.

In no way would I wish to mitigate the dreadful legacy of stalinism or its responsibility, mainly through the agencies of communist parties, for grave losses of credibility and even legitimacy on the Left side of politics. But it would be no service to the Left cause, however defined, to ignore fundamental problems which are not resolved by the demise of the stalinist model.

This new climate of uncertainty has put the Left as a whole on the defensive in the economic field—a field which was once regarded by both sides of politics as a Left stronghold—and has thus also placed the Left on the defensive more broadly. The Left has become reactive rather than pro-active, as a number of recent articles in *ALR* have pointed out. The failures of all the economies claiming to be socialist have made it virtually politically impossible to advocate that either 'state' or 'workers' should take over the means of production as full-blown solutions to the patent evils of capitalist control and power.

In addition, political parties—which the Left, in the main, has elevated even further than the conservative side of politics, as a locus of political wisdom—are suffering from a pos-

sibly irreversible, and probably deserved, cynicism. There is a consequent reluctance to give 'the party' anywhere near the kind of dedication which people of my generation—and even later ones—were prepared to give.

Put in a nutshell, the vision of a viable social system which can be advanced as an alternative to modern capitalism is in disarray, and the means by which radical change may be brought about cannot any longer be based on old models.

This may be the cause of even greater chagrin in that the depth and extent of the problems and dangers which today confront humanity are growing rather than diminishing. And it is also faced with new crises—indeed has created them—such as the environmental one.

Political movements across the whole spectrum have been affected by the changes. But it is the Left which faces the greatest challenge. All sections of the Left have to work in a new situation in which the old signposts have fallen over as though through dry rot, or been engulfed or displaced by political earthquakes, so that if they do point at all, it may be in the wrong direction.

Many people are used to expecting that 'their' publications will reinforce the things they already know or believe. *ALR* does not, in the main, play such a role, nor should it try to do so. It should, rather, do what it has been doing, and try to do it better still. That is, to be an avenue and forum in which ideas and problems can be discussed and developed, rather than pursuing a predetermined 'line'. For the days when the Left could promise the millenium when all problems would be solved, and joy could at last begin, are gone forever.

ERIC AARONS was in 1966, and is in 1991, a member of *ALR's* editorial collective.