

## INTRODUCTION

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A large, dark, textured background image, possibly a close-up of a person's face or a dramatic scene, serving as the backdrop for the title and introduction text.

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# A moral impasse



At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall most people understood that the world was changing, but few anticipated just how profound those changes would be. For the leaders of the 'Free West'—George Bush, Helmut Kohl and Margaret Thatcher—the end of the Cold War was a victory for their side, for the free market and parliamentary democracy.

For the traditional parties of the left, whether of the Social Democratic or Eurocommunist variety, the end of the Cold War was a cruel awakening. Despite ostentatious attempts to mark out a distinct tradition from Soviet-style socialism—with the 'Swedish Model' of social democracy, for example—all left-wing political movements suffered from the discrediting of the so-called people's republics of Eastern Europe. Too late, the left parties learned that they relied upon the Soviet Union as a practical demonstration of an alternative, even if they formally distanced themselves from the Soviet Union in political terms. Without an opposition to the West, even a Soviet one, the compass of political debate, that once stretched from far left to far right, was narrowing sharply.

The American foreign policy specialist Francis Fukuyama suggested that with the resolution of the contest over political institutions in favour of the free market and democracy, we could now say that the era of conflict that he called 'history' had come to an end. It was an ominous indication of the direction of capitalist triumphalism, that it aspired to abstract itself from history altogether, relegating all debate to the past (and some recalcitrant parts of what was called the 'Third World'). Fukuyama's proposition that we were at the End of History echoed the triumphant slogan of Britain's free market pioneering premier Margaret Thatcher: 'There is no alternative'.

But just as they were celebrating triumph, the self-proclaimed Cold War victors discovered the downside to their success. The parties of the left had been discredited. But very quickly, the parties of the right were also being discredited. By 1992 Republican leader George Bush lost the White House, a one-term president; Margaret Thatcher was bundled from office by a party that dreaded fighting another election with her at the helm; only Helmut Kohl, the reunifier of Germany remained in office. In 1996 Margaret Thatcher delivered the Fulton speech on the fiftieth anniversary of Winston Churchill's warning of an Iron Curtain descending over Europe which inaugurated the Cold War. In that speech her assessment of the Cold War 'victory' was far from triumphant. The Cold War, she said 'ended amid high hopes of a New World Order. But those hopes have been grievously

disappointed. Somalia, Bosnia, and the rise of Islamic militancy all point to instability and conflict rather than cooperation and harmony'. And if it seems to Margaret Thatcher that the threat to the New World Order came wholly from peoples and forces external to the West, the title of her speech puts that assumption in question. 'New threats for old' has a ring of desperation, as if the West needed a threat to hold it together. Later in the speech Thatcher protested rhetorically that 'the West is not just some Cold War construct, devoid of significance in today's freer more fluid world'. To which one might be tempted to say that the lady protests too much. The ideological confusion of the right indicates that the Cold War 'victors' were not going to have things all their own way.

The parties of the right saw a rapid disintegration of their own social bases. In America the once-happy alliance of the religious right, 'Reagan Democrats' and low tax campaigners fragmented. Few of America's professionals were attracted to the Cultural War against sexual promiscuity and multiculturalism promised by Pat Buchanan at the 1992 Republican Convention; and few of America's struggling middle classes were willing to buy another sermon about tax breaks from a party that only reduced taxation for the very rich. In Britain, too, the Conservatives lost support among working class voters in the south of England—'Essex Man'—that had helped them into power. Another slump, one that hit the south as hard as the previous one had hit the north took the gloss off popular capitalism. Party membership was falling off. With an average age of 62 and little prospect of new recruitment, the Conservative Party would literally die off early in the next century.

What had happened to the triumph of the right? It might be tempting to see the changes in sociological terms. The economic recession certainly helped to undermine support for right-wing parties. However, the more fundamental condition affecting right-wing politics was the ideological confusion that arose out of the end of the Cold War. Of course, if the Cold War had just been a matter of international alliances and conflict it would not have had any such influence. But the Cold War was more than that. It was a political division of the world between left and right. In fact that division of left and right was something that ran through capitalist societies with parties of left and right, intelligentsias of left and right, newspapers of left and right and political constituencies of left and right. The international framework of the Cold War was the pinnacle of a vast socio-political framework through which public life had been ordered for



more than a century: the range of political opinion from left to right. What the parties of the right learned in the nineties was that they were not the victors of the Cold War, but part of the political system that had been superseded by its end.

British foreign secretary Douglas Hurd understood this point, in part, when he talked in a series of speeches in 1993 about the way that the right had lost its way politically because it lacked an opponent against which it could galvanise its forces. More recently the *New Left Review's* Perry Anderson suggested that left and right are mutually defining—as one declines, so must the other. What both men are grappling with is the subject of this first volume of the new series of *Confrontation: A Moral Impasse*. For the establishment, that impasse arises, surprisingly, out of its apparent victory over the left. With the shrinking of the political sphere of contestable opinion, the establishment has found that its own political vehicles, the parties of the right, also suffer from a loss of legitimacy, and of the ability to rally their forces. Ruling elites throughout the West have discovered that they must learn to cope without mass popular participation in elections and in public life, and suffer instead the ignominy of overwhelming distrust. Governments find that they lack the rudimentary political support to drive through political reforms. Public institutions from Italy's parliament through Britain's monarchy to the American flag no longer revel in the reflected glory of mass participation, but instead provoke only popular disaffection.

In this issue Phil Mullan looks at the way that economic science has become increasingly preoccupied with the subjective responses of individuals; James Heartfield examines the way that academia has lost its faith in reason; Norman Lewis reviews the lost certainties of Cold War politics in international relations; Lynn Revell challenges the penchant for cultural explanation in social life; Jane Cullen looks at the real fears behind the underclass debate; and Andy Clarkson questions the underlying problem with nationalism today.

In their different ways all of these articles are looking at the moral impasse that bedevils the elites throughout the Western world. The intellectual crisis that we find in these different fields is itself a reflection of the loss of purpose that has engulfed the West. In economics it is the loss of the alternatives of Keynesianism and the free market that forces the drift into a subjective speculation over confidence. In academic life the growth of anti-rational currents like postmodernism arises out of the falling away of the 'grand narratives'

of liberalism and socialism, exposing the meagre rational resources of a compromised elite. In international relations the loss of the certainty of the Cold War has led to a veritable nostalgia for the days of the Cuban missile crisis, when the ruling classes at least knew where they stood. With the falling away of social explanations, culture is thrust forward as the universal, and empty, explanation of social and international division. In the underclass debate, we find an elite whose loss of moral purpose is projected, viciously and arbitrarily, upon the poor. And finally, even the elite's trump card, popular nationalism, presents a barrier to elite politics today.

These essays are not meant as historical monographs on a bygone age. Rather they are the first step in claiming the abandoned ground of reason for revolutionaries. The events of the past six years have presented us with profound challenges, but they also present us with profound opportunities.