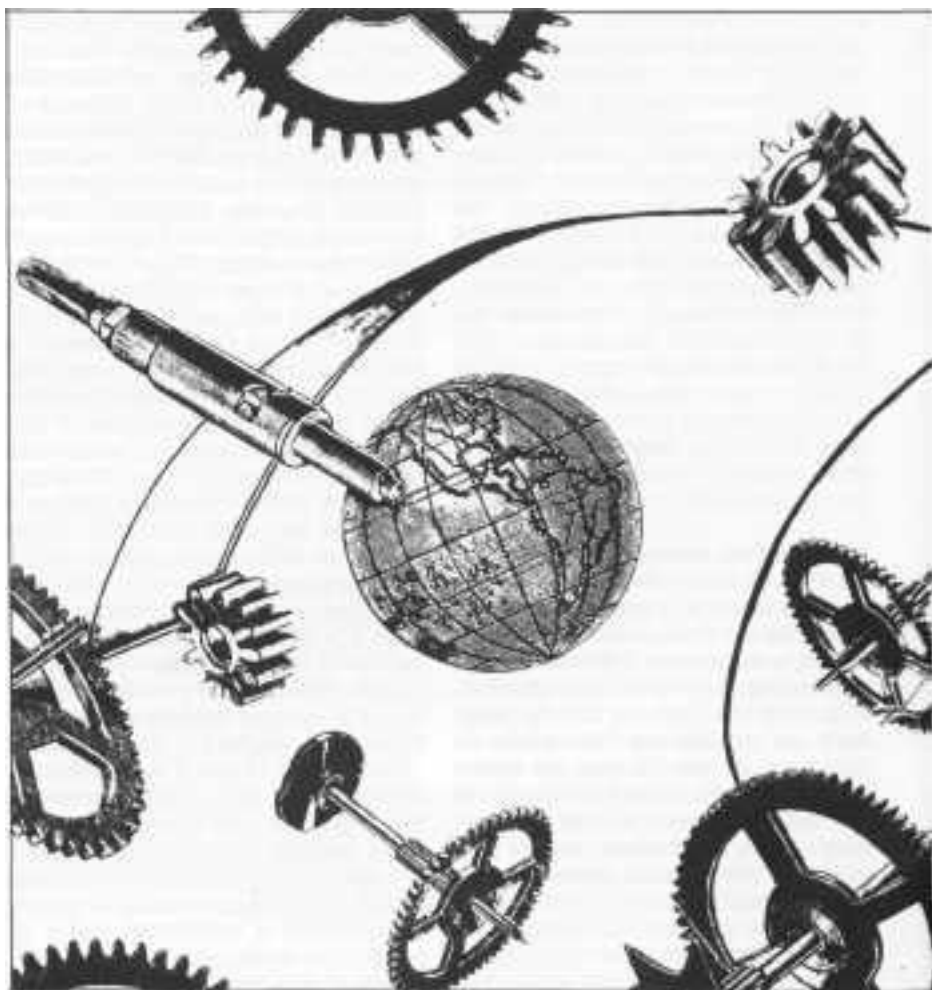


# From Pillars To Post

Eastern Europe is a reminder, if a reminder is needed, of the sheer scale of the crisis of socialism. But **Zygmunt Bawman** argues that crisis is first and foremost a crisis of modernity



**S**ince its inception, modern socialism was and remained the counter-culture of modernity.

Like all counter-cultures, modern socialism performed a triple function in relation to the society it opposed and serviced: it exposed the lie that the achieved state of society was the fulfilment of its promise; it resisted the suppression or concealment of the possibility to implement the promise better; and it pressed the society toward such better implementation of its potential. This triple function modern socialism performed faithfully and on the whole with astounding success.

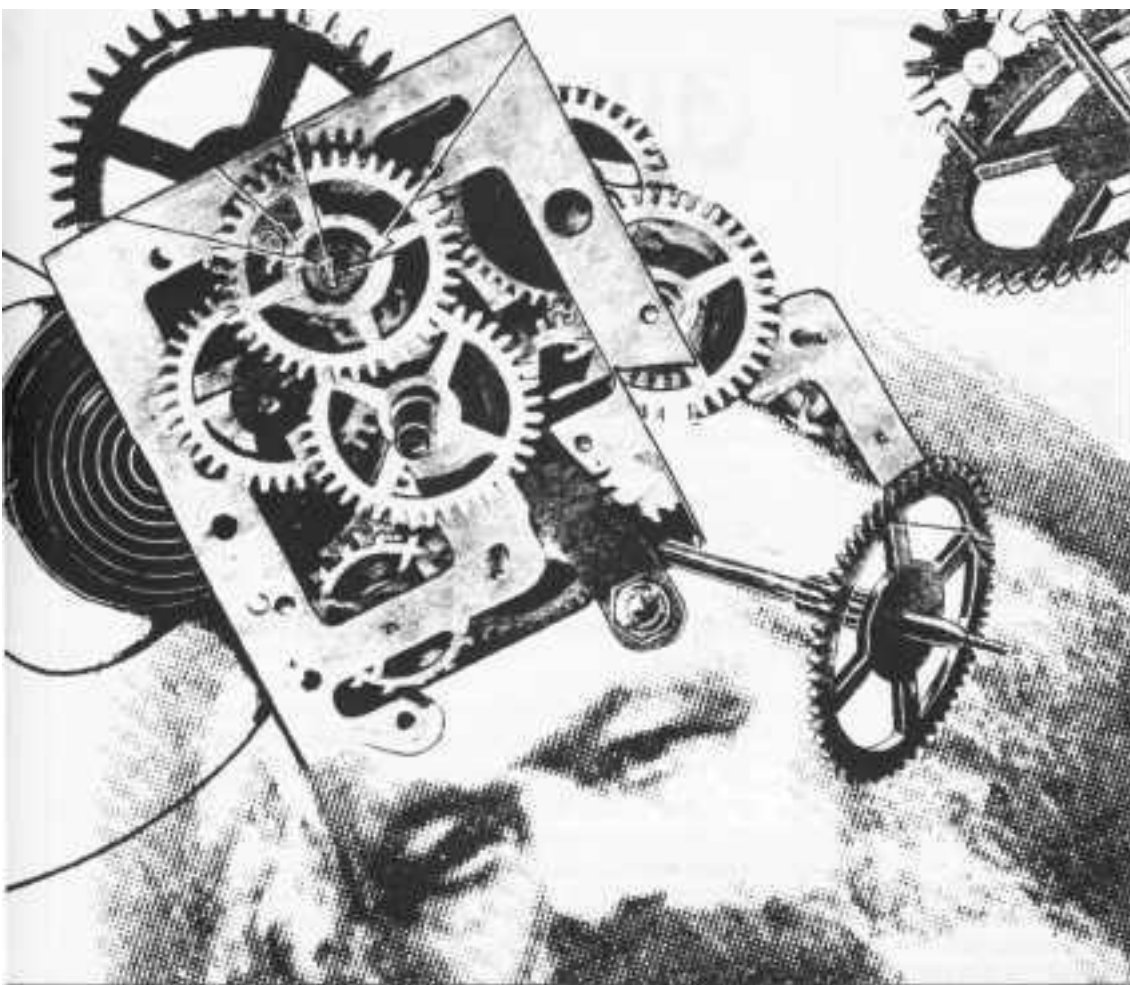
Like all counter-cultures, modern socialism belonged to one historical formation with the society it opposed: that is, it shared its crucial values and it believed in the means trusted to bring those values about.

That togetherness showed itself in the indispensable service socialism rendered to the dynamism and durability of modern (industrial, technological, organised and 'scientifically-managed') society by acquitting itself well of its counter-cultural role: by keeping that society constantly on the move through critique or encouragement, and pointing to new, hitherto-unexplored options, it kept the modern promise of a better, richer, happier society alive.

That togetherness showed itself also in the virtually complete reliance of socialism on the programme set by modernity. Socialism's own programme

was a version of the modernity project; it sharpened and radicalised the promise the whole of modern society vowed to keep. The worthiness and desirability of the modern project as such, socialism was not obliged to prove. They had already been amply demonstrated by the practice of modernity - and firmly set in public consciousness thanks to the eulogies of its official champions. Thus Marx and Engels could in clear conscience praise the admirable job performed by the capitalist administrators of modernity in melting all solids, profaning all sacraments and pushing the creative force of mankind to unheard-of limits. Lassalle could thank *Herren Kapitalisten* for doing the socialist job by clearing the site for the kind of society they only promised to build but the socialists would.

**Put society, the enthusiasm for which modern socialism wholeheartedly shared with modernity, was to be measured by the triple value standard of *liberty, equality and fraternity*. And - socialism agreed with modernity again - it was to be *built*. It was to be artificially designed and constructed, by freeing humankind from constraints of scarcity, ending human dependence on limited gifts of nature, subordinating miserly nature to human needs - and forcing it to deliver more with the help of science and technology, working in unison to magnify human productive forces. Socialism had neither other ends nor other means but those already**



publicly endorsed by the society as a whole.

What socialism did was to re-confirm the ends as worthy of pursuing, and the means as worthy of applying - by laying the blame for the 'poor showing thus far' at the door of the current, capitalist managers of the house of modernity.

The originality, uniqueness and indispensability of socialism did not consist of the invention of ends and means different from those of modernity as a whole, but in promoting the idea that like the carrying capacity of a bridge (that is measured neither by the strongest of its pillars nor by the average strength of its supports, but by the endurance of its weakest pillar), the quality of society is to be measured by the welfare of its weakest member. By socialist standards of measurement, the performance of modernity was constantly found falling short of the declared ends, and efficiency of means was found wanting. Modernity under capitalist management stood accused of underperformance and inefficiency.

Liberty? As long as it was confined to the right of making money, it could not but mean freedom to make others unfree: to make the less fortunate and weaker people into obedient tools of the advancement of the stronger and more resourceful. In practice, though not in theory, liberty turned into a vehicle of social division, where freedom was the new privilege in a society that forbade legal privilege: one could plot social

**'Socialism put modernity to its ultimate test. The failure was as ultimate as the test itself'**



hierarchy of power by measuring the relative degree of freedom or constraint. Under capitalist management, untying the hands of some could not but require bonding some others; freedom was a zero-sum game, the sum total of emancipation being counterbalanced by the growing volume of dependency. Freedom turned into the very cause of unfreedom. Freedom of the profit-makers could be sustained only by the unfreedom of the waged. Its enabling power enabled those who had it to disable those who did not.

Equality? As long as it was confined to formal equality before the law, it produced on a massive scale privileges and deprivations in all practical dimensions of human life. The law, before which all were equal, was a weapon to defend that other inequality. It meant that everyone was equally entitled to seek legal protection for the assets of which they deprived the others; it gave no comfort to those others whose assets were taken away or non-existent. It protected the wealth of the rich as effectively as it guarded the misery of the poor.

Fraternity? With the capitalist versions of liberty and equality firm in the saddle, little was left of the promise of fraternity. The forms of brotherhood that modernity under capitalist management championed or endorsed (patriotism and loyalty to the nation-state most prominent among them), all without exception called for compliance with failed projects of freedom and equality and non-resistance to injustice. Bro-

therhood of the unfree and unequal could mean only meekness, resignation and surrender.

And beneath all these failures and deceitful promises, lay the spectacular ineptitude in converting nature to human uses. Here, socialism was scathing and uncompromising. Whatever the capitalists had done to conquer nature, the socialists would have done or would do better. More growth, more machines, more machine operators. Capitalism was the fetter of modernity. Under capitalist management, modernity forfeited its chance to remake the world from top to bottom, to make nature pliant, malleable, obedient to human will. Private property, and the confined resources and narrow vision that went with it, cramped and dwarfed the unlimited potential of the tools and techniques modernity made available. Competition gagged the reason that could speak only through planning. At the end of the day, more waste was produced than useful products. Under capitalism, modernity was inefficient, profligate and destructive. It could be effective, reasonable, creative: more *productive*. More social engineering, on a grander scale, was needed to make it so. There was nothing wrong with the project of modernity. All that was wrong was the outcome of capitalist distortion. One needs to rescue the courage and the tools of modernity from the capitalist fetters, so that they may show their true potential and so that everybody may enjoy the fruits.

To sum up: between socialism and modernity there was no quarrel. Throughout its history, socialism was modernity's most vigorous and gallant champion. It also claimed to be its only *true* champion. Thus the practical test of modernity conducted under capitalist auspices seemed conclusive. Successive defeats did not undermine the belief in the essential soundness of the project. The socialist critic of capitalism was modernity's most faithful and effective friend. Whatever the ugliness of its capitalist edition, modernity need not be disparaged. One could still hope that the alternative publisher would correct the errors.

**In the end, though, the friend proved the gravedigger.** The alternative edition did little to correct the errors and nothing could any more protect the beauty of the project against the ugliness of its fulfilment. It so happened that under the socialist, not capitalist, auspices the project was pushed to its radical limits: grand designs, unlimited social engineering, huge and bulky technology, total transformation of nature. Deserts were irrigated (but they turned into salinated bogs); marshlands were dried (but they turned into deserts); massive gas pipes criss-crossed the land to remedy nature's whims in distributing its resources (but they keep exploding with a force unequalled by natural disasters of yore); millions were lifted from the 'idiocy of rural life' (but they got po-

sioned by the effluvia of rationally-designed industry, if they did not perish first on the way). Raped and crippled, nature failed to deliver the riches one hoped it would; the total scale of design only made the devastation total. Worse still, all that raping and crippling proved to be in vain. Little equality followed, still less freedom. And for the brotherhood - it proved to be of the kind that wilts with the first breeze of liberty. Socialism put modernity to its ultimate test. The failure was as ultimate as the test itself.

**T**he cogency of the socialist message derived from the entrenchment of the modern social order. The persuasiveness of the socialist promise derived from the popularity of the values and credibility of the means championed by the modern powers. For better or worse, rich and poor, till death do them part, socialism wedded its fate to that of the modern project. They grew together. They triumphed together. Together they faced their day of reckoning.

The present crisis of socialism is as derivative as its past triumphs. It is the crisis of socialism as a distorted and bankrupt form of modernity; but it is also a reflection of the crisis of the modern project as such. Socialist counter-culture outlived the culture it opposed. Through a paradox of history, it stayed for a while alone in the field defending the ramparts vacated by other troops. By the logic of historical memory, socialism remained the counter-culture of modernity at a time when the world around questioned ever louder the values and the strategies that served as the trademark of the modern era.

No room here to ask why that questioning started. But it did. By now, it has gone far - far enough to suppose that the historical formation which gave birth to socialism and sustained its struggles is no more, and that consequently fighting the old battles acquires ever-more pronounced quixotic quality.

Is this the end of modernity? Nothing just ends in history, no project is finished and done with. Clean borders between epochs are but projections of our relentless urge to separate the inseparable and order the flux. Modernity is still with us. It lives in many forms: as the pressure of unfulfilled hopes constantly invigorated by institutions created to promote them, as the zeal of perforce belated ('Third World') imitators as the unsolved problems it has spawned and the way of reacting to them (by yet more technology, yet more specialised expertise) it has taught us all to practise. This is, perhaps, what people like Habermas refer to when they speak of the 'unfinished project of modernity'. That the project is unfinished, may well be the case. But something happened to us, to those who undertake and finish projects. The very fact that we now speak of modernity as a *project* (a design with intentions, ends and means) testifies most convincingly

to the change in us. We did not talk of the 'project' when we were busy doing what now looks like unfinished business.

Michael Phillipson gave his recently published book the title *In Modernity's Wake*. A felicitous phrase. It evokes exactly the image we need: the ship has passed by, its passage roughened the waters, left a turbulence so that all sailors around have to rework the course of their boats - while those who fell into the water must swim hard to reach them. Once the waters quieten down again though, we, the sailors and former passengers alike, can have a closer look at the ship that caused all that. It is still quite close, huge and clearly visible in all its weighty bulk, but we are now *behind* it and we do not stand any more on its deck. Thus we can see it in all its impressive shape, scan it, plot the direction it takes. We may now decide whether to follow its course. We may also better judge the wisdom of navigation, and even protest against the captain's commands.

Living 'in the wake' means turbulence, but also the wider vistas and new wisdom they offer. In modernity's wake, its passengers become aware of serious faults in the design of the ship that brought them where they are now, reconciled to the fact that it could not bring them to a more comely destination and ready to rethink the old navigatory principles.

**W**hat is truly new in our situation today is, in other words, our vantage point. While still in close neighbourhood of the modern era, and feeling the effects of the turbulence it has caused on its way, we can now (better still, we are prepared and willing to) take a cool and critical view of modernity in its totality, evaluate its performance, pass judgment on the solidity and congruence of its construction. This is ultimately what the idea of *postmodernity* stands for: an existence fully-determined and defined by the fact of being *post* and overwhelmed by the awareness of being in such condition. Postmodernity is no more (but no less either) than modernity taking a long and attentive look at itself, not liking what it sees and sensing the urge to change. Modernity coming of age: making a full inventory of its gains and losses, psychoanalysing itself, discovering the intentions it never before spelled out, finding them mutually cancelling and incongruous. Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility. Modernity consciously abandoning what - as it now seems - it was once unconsciously doing.

**The triple-value alliance of liberty, equality and brotherhood** did not escape scrutiny. No wonder; however hard one tried, one found oneself constantly in a trade-off situation, vainly struggling to reach all three at the same time. One found liberty militating against equality, equality giving short shrift to the dream of liberty, and brotherhood of

doubtful virtue as long as the other two sank teeth in each other's throat. One came to think as well that - given the huge and yet untapped energy of human liberty - the objectives of equality and brotherhood sold human potential too cheaply. Equality could not be easily distanced from the prospect of uniformity. Brotherhood smacked all too often of the enforced unity and the demand on ostensible siblings to sacrifice individuality in the name of a putative common cause. The means did not fare better than the values. The conquest of nature brought more waste than human happiness. One thing in which the industrial expansion succeeded most spectacularly was the multiplication of risks: more risks, bigger risks, unheard-of risks. For some time now, most 'economic growth' has been propelled by the need to defuse the risks it manufactured: of overpopulation, undernourishment, overheating of atmosphere, contaminating water supplies, poisoning food and air, spreading 'new and improved' diseases. More and more, the conquest of nature looked like the very illness it was alleged to cure.

And so the values began to shift. First at the bizarre, idiosyncratic margins, easy to pooh-pooh and dismiss. But then the slow movement turned into a stampede and could not be ignored any more. It cannot be ignored that the new triple-value alliance gains in popularity at the expense of the old one: the new horizons that seem to inflame human imagination and inspire human action today are those of *liberty, diversity and tolerance*. It is now up to socialism (and to socialists, of course) to take note. If socialism is to retain its critical role of counter-culture, it needs face the fact that is now a different culture - one aimed at liberty, diversity and tolerance - that it confronts. Note that the 'if' is just a rhetorical dodge. Like all cultures, the rising culture of postmodernity must spawn its counter-culture one way or another. And it will, whatever socialists do. What does depend on socialists, however, is whether the criterion they and only they can promote and force into action - that of judging society by the *care it takes of its weakest member* - will figure as centrally in the coming history of postmodernity as it did in the past history of the modern era. Let there be no doubt: when judged by this criterion the post-modern practice looks as flawed as its predecessor.

Liberty is today as truncated as before - though different parts have now been amputated. In post-modern practice, liberty boils down to consumer choice. To enjoy it, one must be a consumer first. This condition leaves out millions. Like before, poverty disqualifies. Freedom in its new, market interpretation is as much a privilege as it was in its old versions. In some other respects, however, it bears strikingly new features. If, as in our market-dominated society, communal needs are to be met

**'Post-modernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility'**



by individual acts of acquisition, the maiming of liberty cannot but affect *everybody*, rich and poor alike, exemplary or flawed consumers. There are, after all, needs that cannot be met by no matter how many personal purchases, and so anybody's freedom of choice looks severely limited. One cannot buy one's way out from polluted air, a broken ozone layer, a rising radiation level; one cannot buy one's way into a forest immune to acid rain or a seacoast protected against toxic algae thriving on the lush nourishment of sewage. In the few instances that buying oneself out seems plausible - like escaping dilapidated public transport in a private car, or running away from the squalor of public health into a private clinic - the choice only adds to the problem that made it necessary in the first place. It turns ineffective, therefore, the moment it is taken. There are the weak yet to gain their freedom; but there are as well weak, uncared-for, deprived aspects of everybody's life yet to be protected by communal effort.

**Diversity thrives; and the marketplace** thrives with it. More precisely, only such diversity is allowed to thrive as benefits the market. Like before, autonomy has to be fought for, if diversity is to mean anything but a variety of marketable lifestyles; in the end, it means nothing but a thin varnish of changeable fashion meant to hide the uniformly market-dependent condition. What is to be fought for, is above all the right to communal, as distinct from individual, diversity; a diversity stemming from a communally chosen and communally serviced form of life. Such diversity cannot hope to be serviced, let alone guaranteed, by the cornucopia of merchandised identities. The market has nothing to gain from it; the best one can count on is its indifference. At worst, the hostility of the market is to be reckoned with. Communally managed collective identities may jar with the idea of individually chosen lifestyles - the only freedom the market views with unqualified sympathy.

**A**s practised by market-led post-modernity, *tolerance* degenerates into estrangement; the growth of spectator curiosity means the fading of human interest. In other words, tolerance does not lead to solidarity; it *fragments* instead of uniting. It squares well with communal separation and the reduction of the social bond to visual contact (best mediated by the screen - and prevented from becoming troublesome by segregation of 'the others' in urban ghettos). Most importantly, tolerance is fully compatible with domination. Those on the top may practise it without fear because it re-affirms their superiority and privilege: 'the other', just by being different, loses entitlement to equal treatment; indeed, inferiority of the other is most often fully justified in terms of his or her difference ('we are not racist; we just don't

want that other culture around. Each is better off when sticking to their own kin'). And so the abandonment of converting zeal comes together with the withdrawal of the promise of equality. With mutual links reduced to tolerance, difference means perpetual distance, non-co-operation and hierarchy. It fails the socialist test of the welfare of the weakest member. It will go on failing that test as long as it is not forced by socialist opposition to the higher level: that of active co-operation and assistance, of mutual support, of *solidarity*.

**This much for the values postmodernity** promotes. As to the means - the rape of nature has been replaced with concern for the preservation of natural balance. Forcing nature to surrender to human wishes, that warring cry of modernity at the height of its ambitions, is fast losing its audience and is equally rapidly being replaced by the popular cult of the 'wisdom of Nature'. Fewer people today believe in the magic capacity of economic growth and technological expansion. One thing most people expect technology to deliver without fail and with a growing speed is more discomfort and more danger.

Under capitalist management, however, new concerns and new sensitivities are used to reinforce the very processes they abhor and condemn. Risks are not reduced, let alone extinguished. They are only removed from public sight and thus made safe from criticism (risks tend to travel over the globe in a direction opposite to riches: the poorer the country, the more likely it is to bear the brunt of the costs of the carefree life of the wealthy - for instance, to host the most poisonous and ecologically-devastating industrial plants). Such technology-generated risks as cannot be moved away or hidden are declared to need yet more technology, yet more marketable gadgets. 'Nature-conscious', 'ozone-friendly' and 'green' sprays, detergents or bleaches turn into big business and bring 'new-and-improved' profits. As before, freedom from discomfort and risks 'must pay for itself. Big bills of social catastrophe are deemed to be cleared with the small change of private shopping concerns. In the process, the global origin of problems is effectively hidden from view, and the struggle against risks may go on producing more and more sinister risks, thus undermining its own future chance of success.

This is, though, but a lesser part of the deception. Another, more seminal part, is the closing-up of the new sensitivity in the frame of purely technical discourse: both the grudgingly-admitted sins and their redemption are confined to the carefully de-politicised ('politically neutral') world of technology and expertise, thereby protecting from criticism the social framework which makes sins inevitable and redemption unattainable. What is left outside the confines of rational discourse is the very issue that stands a chance of mak-

ing the discourse rational: the *political* issue of democratic control over technology and expertise, their purposes and their desirable limits. The issue of politics as self-management and collectively-made choices.

**W**hatever value or means championed by postmodernity we consider, they all point (if only tacitly and by omission) to politics, democracy and full-blown citizenship as the sole vehicles of their implementation. With politics, those values and means look like the chance of a better society; *without* politics they seem to be deceitful slogans at best, sources of new and yet unfathomed dangers at worst. Postmodernity is not the end of politics, as it is not the end of history. On the contrary, whatever may be attractive in its promise calls for more politics, more political engagement, more political effectiveness of individual and communal action. The call is stifled, though, by the hubbub of consumer bustle. It is unlikely to be heard in the world of shopping malls and Disneylands where all that matters is an enjoyable piece of theatre and thus nothing really matters much.

And so it remains the task of the socialist counter-culture to make the call audible. Its responsibility has lost nothing of its past importance. As long as the responsibility is not shouldered, post-modern renditions of liberty will go on producing more privilege and more deprivation, ever-vaster areas of disempowerment in the life of free consumers and ever-more populous ranks of the flawed, disabled and disqualified outcasts at the margins of the consumer world. Cultural diversity will go on serving as the protective shield of political and economic domination. Tolerance will continue to feed indifference and unconcern, thereby effectively precluding solidarity. It is up to the socialist counter-culture to make sure that the emancipatory potential of post-modern values comes true and that proper means are deployed for this purpose; so that, in the end, the quality of society may be improved by improving the lot of its weakest members.

Socialism and postmodernity join ranks in their critique of the threat always looming in the hubris and cruel self-confidence of modernity; and in their exposure of the incongruence of the now-discredited modern values and strategies. They are at war, however, as to postmodernity's own values and strategies. The *casus belli* is, as before, the capitalist management of the project, which cannot but transform freedom into privilege, diversity into discrimination and tolerance into callousness. The battleground is, as before, politics - presently occupied by technology and waiting to be transferred into the self-management of citizens. The purpose of the war is, as before, to force society to keep its word: to deliver what is best in its promise and to stave off the gruesome consequences of mismanagement.

**'It is up to the socialist counter-culture to make sure that the emancipatory potential of post-modern values comes true'**

