



New Times or class struggle?

Mark Perryman, from the editorial board of the Communist Party magazine *Marxism Today*, and Alan Johnson from *Socialist Organiser* debated at the Workers' Liberty summer school in July 1989

Mark Perryman

If I was a 'conspiracy theorist', which you'll soon discover I'm not, I could think that I was being set up — I'm sure that's not the case — because in the Chair's introduction to the session there are a number of phrases used: "In place of the old class struggle, diverse alliances; dispel class struggle; working class

fading away".

I want to say quite clearly, right now, that I'm not going to debate the preposterous proposition which says 'farewell' to the working class, because it is a proposition that has never, and will never, be put forward in *Marxism Today*. So, let's get that one out of the way.

What we are saying on class is that class is the starting point of our politics, not the end point, and that class, like socialism, is itself problematic. It's not

the beginning, middle and end of the argument. Unless one accepts that class is itself problematic, we're not talking about politics, we're talking about trench warfare. It's like trying to fight the Second World War as if you're doing the war games of Napoleon of the 19th century.

I find it very interesting that virtually the whole of the far left, be it Socialist Organiser, Socialist Worker, or Living Marxism, have chosen 'post-Fordism' as the way into discussing 'New Times'. They've chosen the economic way into that group of ideas, and one could choose a whole different range of ways; we could be debating post-Modernism, what we term 'the politics of identity', or 'the politics of choice' — a whole range of different ways in — yet you, like so many others on the far left, have chosen the economic way and that says something about your politics.

I want to deal with post-Fordism as a way into discussing the crisis of political parties. So I'm going to deal with post-Fordism relatively briefly and schematically. I'm going to concentrate more on post-Fordist *consequences* for the political and, more specifically, for the revolutionary party.

Just to start off with some of the statistics: a third of our present workforce are now working in offices; a third of the Gross National Product comes from the distribution sector; and, since 1960, 2.5 million jobs have been lost in manufacturing. So, there's clearly a shift going on.

Fordism, the precursor to post-Fordism, can be typified by four characteristics: standardised production; mass production; scientific management; and assembly line production, the flow-line. Those four characteristics have four consequences: mass consumption; protected national markets; vulnerability to falls in demand; the mass worker.

Post-Fordism, on the other hand, is first of all an economic system which has been revolutionised by information technology to conquer the problem of supply and demand.

I'm sure some of you shop at

Sainsbury's, so you may be interested to know how this has had an impact on Sainsbury's. Every evening at Sainsbury's they receive details of the sales, all 12,000 of its lines, from the check-outs at each of its shops. These are turned into orders for warehouse deliveries for the coming night and replacement production for the following day. With computerised control of the stock for the shops, transport networks, automatic loading and unloading, Sainsbury's flow-line, make-to-order system has conquered the Fordist problem of stocks.

Secondly, there's been a fragmentation of the mass product. Sainsbury's in Islington gives you an absolutely brilliant example of this. If you go to the Sainsbury's in Liverpool Road, by the Angel, you'll find there pitta bread, the widest range of mineral water you can imagine in your life, a whole range of Greek food, taramasalata, hummus, and so on. If you go to the Sainsbury's down on Holloway Road you won't find any of those exotic products. Class is alive and kicking among Sainsbury's customers.

Thirdly, you have the move from economy of scale to the economy of scope. I'm sure you've all heard about what they used to say about Model T Fords — "You can have any Model T you like, as long as it's black." Well, now just remember the Paula Yates ad (I can't remember which car it's for). She goes through all the different colours — orchid, rose, yellow, purple, anything you like, not only the body, the dashboard could be a different colour to the bonnet, the bonnet a different colour to the doors, the doors a different colour to the roof, and so on; you can have anything you like. So it's a movement from economy of scale to the economy of scope.

Linked in to that we have the role of innovation within this economic system, with design being a key area of employment. If you like, it's shifting from the era of keeping up with the Joneses to being different from the Joneses.

Now that all can sound quite exciting. It can sound like the era of innovation, creativity and variety. And it certainly jars with the puritanical and moralist tradition which is as endemic in the far left as in the Labour right and, I suppose, the Communist Party in between. But I want to make it quite clear that we're not celebrating post-Fordism, we're engaging with it.

Robin Murray, in his article on post-Fordism in *Marxism Today*, quotes a British worker working in a Japanese, very post-Fordist factory in the North East: "They want us to live for work; we want to work to live." So, they're creating 'quality circles', whole new ways of working within a factory, but it's still based on an extremely oppressive system.

Another aspect of post-Fordism is the new relationship between core workers and part-time workers.

But within post-Fordism there's a constant resistance as well as acceptance of that system. You have, particularly since 1968 — '68 being a key point in this — development of craft movements, alternative plans, workers' co-ops, workers' plans, and so on. There's a plurality of contestations of post-Fordism.

Because Fordism was the era of mass production, it was at the same time the era of the mass party, of mass politics. Post-Fordism changes that. Before I say something about the broad consequences of this for revolutionary organisations, I want to make a point about Trotskyist organisations in Britain.

To me there are two crucial dates in the development of the post-war Trotskyist movement in Britain. First, 1956, when there was the most serious split ever in the Communist Party. 10,000 left the CP virtually overnight, over the question of the invasion of Hungary. The CP at that time agreed with that invasion. Then in 1968, you saw tens or hundreds of thousands involved in revolutionary politics, but not involved in revolutionary organisations.

Between those times — '56, '68 and '89 — the total numbers actually involved in those organisations which could be termed Trotskyist has never exceeded 8,000. Now there's clear evidence of the stagnation, if not decline, of the SWP, the eclipsing of Militant as a significant force on the far left of the Labour Party, the RCP suffering yet another split over Ireland, and stagnating around about 500, and your own tendency — well, we won't go into your problems, I'm sure you can talk about that yourselves.

I don't make those points in idle gloating. I think there's a bad tradition on the left of never being honest about your own organisation, never having any humility. When I joined the CP ten years ago, it had something like 25,000 members; we've now got in the region of 8,500 members — I won't give you the precise figure! We had a significant split in 1987 with the Stalinists on the *Morning Star* and we had a real problem reforging and renewing our organisation. The traditional strength of the CP in the trade union left has suffered. The real growth point for the CP is the influence of Marxism Today — I think you recognise that, otherwise presumably you wouldn't be having this debate.

There is a real crisis of the political party. This is also true of the right and centre. Even the Greens will find this. It is a crisis of the party form itself.

What is needed is a new conversation between the left and society. It's like conceiving of society as a party — I don't mean political party, I mean parties that one enjoys in the evenings — no-one really wants to talk to us, and very often, because of our culture, we find it very difficult to talk to them. And that conversation is central to revolutionary politics because, I would say, the defining characteristic of revolutionary politics is mass politics. Unless you are about mass politics you are about the politics of sectarianism and the ghetto.

There are six reasons why the party is in crisis and all of those reasons are drawn from the fact that we are living in the beginnings of a post-Fordist era, which our politics — I include my own — are only beginning to come to terms with.

Firstly, we have seen over the last 20 years, the vast expansion of what we mean by politics. This is most crucially explained by the women's movement slogan, which should become much more than a slogan, "The personal is political". The realm of

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politics has moved far beyond what boys, men, used to traditionally define as the political.

Secondly, there is a recognition across the left that there is a changed role for the state and the problem is that we are dragged down by the baggage of Labourism which continues to uphold the Keynesian, 1945 Beveridge consensus that the welfare state is A-OK and there's nothing really to worry about; you can just go back to defending the health service, having comprehensive education as it's always been and so on, everything will be all right.

Thirdly, we see the increasing internationalisation of politics. It isn't just about 1992 and EMS, it's also about forging a new relationship between the north and the south in the world.

Fourthly, there is a need to create a culture where new thinking is welcomed within the left. I've always found it absolutely ironic, but if you come up with new ideas you're accused of being a revisionist on the Marxist left.

I would have thought if you could engage with Marx, Lenin, Engels, Trotsky, Gramsci, Luxemburg, and bring their ideas up to date, that should be welcomed. Instead, revisionism is seen as the bees knees — as far low as you can get.

The right has occupied the intellectual high ground for the last 20 years. That's undeniable. It's not because of Rupert Murdoch, or whoever owns the *Daily Mail*, it's because they've been able to set the *intellectual* agenda and take us to the cleaners.

Fifthly, we've seen the fragmentation of constituencies. As I was saying at the beginning, class is the starting point, not the end point of politics, and class is itself problematic in exactly the same way as gender is, as race is, as sexuality. It's a myth that there are homogenous blocs in society which are not riven with fragmentation. That fragmentation is being accelerated under the impact of post-Fordism and post-Modernism and a number of other pressures.

And, sixthly, there are changing polarities in politics. Exactly where does one place the Greens on the political line, left or right? Certainly sections of them, represented by Sarah Parkin, you would clearly put on the right. There are other sections — the Association of Socialist Greens, and those associated with the Socialist Conference — you'd easily pigeonhole on the left. But the vast majority do not occupy a clear position on that line.

Similarly, within the Labour Party the key division now is between the modernisers and the traditionalists. And the modernisers are not always from the left or right. It's very difficult to place them into those pigeonholes. Some people find it easy, but that isn't the way we're going to move forward.

And so, in the face of that crisis in the political party as an organisational form, we need a new political language which is very foreign to our traditional political culture. It is a language which takes risks, which is about uncertainty, which is about doubt and which is about the one thing the left is most scared about — compromise.

Labourism is failing because of its wholesale failure to modernise. It is trapped in the quagmires of the past. On the other hand we have the traditional Leninism of the far left which is exemplified in one staple form in the regimes of Eastern Europe — inefficiency, corruption, inequality, centralisation, environmental despoilation. The tragic massacre of the last month in Beijing, as your organisation should know above all others, was not an isolated example of Stalinist repression. It was just one more, wasn't it, in a litany.

Trotskyism has traditionally been a dynamic force. That's where its rationale has come from. I wonder if it's going to be able to, in the new times which we are beginning to enter, to remove itself from the mindset of certainty and actually have the guts to take risks with its politics. I hope it will, I believe that it will, but that's open to question.

Alan Johnson

I entirely agree that there's a desperate need on the left for a political culture in which ideas can be debated seriously in a democratic form.

Socialist Organiser has had its own experience over the last five or so years of trying to raise Marxism up to the level of the new problems posed by the latter half of the 20th century: such issues as the development of modern imperialism, and how precisely we approach the national question at this time. We have been meeting indifference and hostility and demagogy right across the left. So we agree on the need for a political culture which allows for real debate.

But part of that political culture has to be the old saying that who says A has to say B, and I won't agree with your view that the Communist Party still holds to class as being central. As somebody said, the politics of Marxism Today is the

It is often left to writers in the bourgeois press to say things clearly about the left. I have an article written by Edward Pearce, writing in the *Sunday Times* — or 'Ed' Pearce when he writes in *Marxism Today!* — and he says: "What a pleasure it is these days to converse with the Communist Party of Great Britain, who are becoming full members of the democratic mainstream. But if the party is to be candid with itself, it will have to honour Eduard Bernstein, the first revisionist, who prophesied the 20th century in the 1890s." I think that is a substantially more honest and accurate assessment of the trajectory of Marxism Today than Mark Perryman's. I'll try to prove that, not just assert it.

The idea is that 'New Times' and 'post-Fordism' mean such profound economic, social, cultural and political changes that almost everything we once held to be true is no longer true. Central to that idea is the notion that 'New Times' decouples and pulls apart the working class from the project of

socialism. That's the core of 'New Times' politics.

Martin Jacques said it 12 months ago: "To have any chance of success the movement of opposition must seek to embrace not only the centre, but also the wets and, for want of a better expression, the post-Thatcherite wets like Michael Heseltine in the Tory Party."

That is the political context, the framework, in which Mark and people like Mark are urging us to respond to 'New Times'.

There is an immediate contradiction: you say to us that you're engaged in the only real genuine dialogue with the 'new social movements' — of feminism, the peace movement, etc — and yet you propose an alliance with Heseltine, the man who sent the troops in to smash up the Molesworth peace camp! Now that is a circle that can't be squared, and I think it is representative of a whole number of circles that can't be squared in the Marxism Today package.

What they offer is a particular interpretation of the changes that are happening in capitalism at the present time, and their implications, used as a means to justify and 'explain' the need to abandon class politics. It is an attempt once more to lead the labour movement into the old class collaborationist 'Popular Front' politics which the CPs have had, with few interruptions, since 1935.

What I'm trying to do here in the debate is three things: one, to talk about some of those changes in capitalism and dispute the idea which, I think, is at the core of what you're saying, that socialism has been de-coupled from the working class as a project for the liberation of humanity.

Secondly, I want to talk about the political project of the CP today, which I think is basically this:

- to demoralise, defeat and isolate the socialist left, what you call the 'fundamentalists'.

- to help recreate the Labour Party as a Labour Party which is capable of going to the third stage, which is forming a broad alliance with the Democrats, the Greens, Michael Heseltine and, of course, the CP itself.

Thirdly, I want to say a few words about the 'solution' they propose at the end, about which I think there is a thorough-going utopianism.

Mark makes a massive oversimplification of the old world he describes as 'Fordism' and of the new world he describes as 'post-Fordism'.

For instance, take the notion that branches of production are becoming smaller in scale, that workplace size is declining, etc., that mass production is now at an end, and that we are now moving to a new kind of production based on the small scale. Most of the German chemical industry is concentrated in three massive plants which employ 50,000 workers each. Vehicles, electronics, arms and food — the key, core sectors of capitalist production — are still concentrated in big factories.

Another fact: Fordist production was

never the norm in Britain. Take the car industry in Britain: less than one third of British manufacturing used assembly lines, and only half of them were ever mechanically paced. It's an enormously more complicated picture.

You talked about diversity and, citing Sainsbury's, philosophised upon the greatly increased choice of pitta bread and Greek food. I'll quote what somebody else said about it: "It's true that Islington consumers can get their hands on Greek yoghurt more easily these days, but only because it's no longer manufactured in Cretan villages, but in a giant factory in Athens."

Yet Marxism Today's Stuart Hall tells us how he walks around a supermarket and realises that there's a Thatcherite subject in all of us when he looks along the shelves and sees the enormous array and choice of goods. He becomes hypnotised by all that. But he's seeing everything from the *consumption* end of capitalism. That is to ignore fundamental developments that are taking place in production. There it is still true that the kind of flexible specialisation and diversity that you talk about is dependent upon — still — mass consumption inside the working class, and mass production methods.

The restructuring of capitalism is a fact, but it is enormously more complicated than it's talked about by those like Marxism Today, who want to use the changes taking place in capitalism now to argue for their old 'Popular Front', anti-working class politics. Politically, they saw the working class off long ago; 50 years later they fondly imagine capitalism is seeing it off sociologically for them!

New technology has had an impact. But in 1980, there were still more people keeping books by hand in America than there were workers in every single computer industry there.

That is not to deny the fact of development and change; it is to say that the simple notion that we had 'Fordism' in the past, and now we have something else, 'post-Fordism', completely crudifies, distorts and misrepresents the developments that have taken place in the working class.

You imply that 'Fordism' was a form of production in which trade unions developed easily, that working class organisation and power grew out of Fordism mechanically, almost as a matter of course. Take a British factory like Ford of Dagenham, for instance. You know how Dagenham was organised? The Communist Party tried to organise Dagenham and got beaten back. The Trotskyists tried to organise Dagenham and got beaten back. It was an enormous, protracted struggle to organise the trade unions inside Ford Dagenham, and at the end of the day it was the Ministry of Labour in the Second World War which imposed trade unionism there! That's how they got organisation at Ford.

So it's not true that once upon a time we had workplaces that were easy to organise for workers, and today everything is so difficult and incredibly different, and the working class can no longer organise itself to be a collective

aspiring to change the world.

The notion of core and periphery workers is also a very problematic one, because the assumption is, again, that there was once an enormous homogeneity in the Fordist industries; that there was a roughly similar range of skill levels, and thus it was easier to develop trade unions and the spirit of collectivity: and now everything is changed or changing, there is a fracturing, a breaking-up of the working class into 'core' and 'periphery'.

There is some truth about these ideas, but we have to separate the sense from the nonsense. For instance, Henry Ford's own policy — the policy of classic 'Fordism' — was to create precisely a flexible workforce based upon a core of workers and a manipulable, unorganised, part-time, contracted-out periphery. This was a problem for those who organised Ford workers then. It's a problem now, but it is no new problem. At Ford Halewood, for instance, there has been a restructuring battle over the last three or four years on the shopfloor — an enormously protracted fight.

The kinds of workplace organisation that are emerging out of it are to do with more flexibility; workers can no longer stay on the trim line, they've got to go to the press shop if they're told to; there's much more flexibility across the plant. Small autonomous work groups are being put together there, that's true, but most people who look at it see that the potential working class collectivity at work is *bigger* out of those kinds of production.

In fact the capitalists are very worried that, suddenly, they can't split the workforce, section by section. They've got to move them around the plant. The old kinds of demarcation based on job control were never simply an unambiguously good thing for workers. They also split them up into sections, and sectionalism to a degree came out of it.

So there are a whole series of changes and they are far more complex, I think, than Mark's picture of them. We can't glibly conclude that Fordism leads somehow to working class unity, and post-Fordism not only to working class disunity, but to the destruction of the very possibility of the working class organising itself into a force that can change society.

That the manufacturing workforce has declined is undoubtedly true. But the capacity of the working class to organise and fight is not confined to manufacturing workers alone. Even if it were, in Britain today, about one quarter to one third of the workforce is still manufacturing workers. You know something? In the years 1968 to 1974, when a strike-wave of enormous proportions flared right across Europe, the proportion of manufacturing workers in the workforce of Italy, France, Germany and the rest was the same as it is now in Britain. The structure of the class we've got now is very similar to the structure of the class in the '60s and '70s when there was this enormous strike-wave. Think about that!

A lot of the ideas coming from Marxism Today are very Anglo-centric, or Euro-centric. In the world as a whole there are more industrial proletarians of the classic kind now than at any time in human history. There are millions and millions of us all over the world; we are growing in support — that's the actual development looked at on a world scale.

You put it to us now as if it's an original idea, that capitalism has spread its wings and operates on a world scale. But it's 60 years since Trotsky managed to smuggle 'The Third International after Lenin' into the Comintern discussions, insisting on precisely this idea as the cornerstone of revolutionary politics, that you must start from the world economy in working out your political outlook and programme!

Capitalism always restructures because it is a dynamic system based upon competition. The competitors have to improve their production, so they invest in new technology, they develop new ways of doing things. Every time they do that, in Marx's words, everything that is solid melts into air. So old regions that were the heart of the working class decline, new regions arise, greenfield sites don't remain greenfield sites for ever. Milton Keynes may be a safe haven for capitalists for now, but as more workers go there and industry becomes concentrated there, it will become no longer a haven for capitalism.

The real heart of the working class is its social relationship to capital. The essential thing is not a particular trade, or a particular cultural attribute, but a social relation between capitalists who own and control the means of production and workers who have to sell their labour power to those capitalists if they are to live in this system, and whose exploitation is thus the source of the profit and upon which the entire system depends. Now it's either/or. Either that is still the fundamental relationship in our society, and within that system of labour-capital relations we have got a process of restructuring, which, of course we need to analyse and understand; or something fundamentally new is happening and the working class, because it has lost or is losing its central place inside capitalist society, is no longer able to act as a class to create a new society. Either/or!

I want now to come back to Martin Jacques and Michael Heseltine. Jacques' basic argument is that the crisis of the labour movement is so deep and the ruling class offensive so bad that we must forget about socialism — for the foreseeable future anyway — and settle for a 'popular front'.

The effect that that's had on the left has unfolded in two stages. First of all we had the stage where they talked about the 'third road' — that is still what is being said now whenever it is a left-wing audience: 'between Labourism and Leninism we have the third road: detach Kinnock from the right. Don't press Kinnock, give him some breathing space on the left so he can move into it. Let's have a participatory left, the modernising left that he talked about'.

But in fact the right detached Kinnock

from the soft left, then Kinnock dragged most of the soft left in his slipstream. Solidarity, the right-wing organisation of the Labour Party, has announced its own disbandment because it says, and with good reason, its job has been done and, by and large, it now sits on the front bench. What is the CP's verdict on that New Model Labour Party? The verdict in the new CP manifesto is this: "The first signs of modernisation are appearing with the Labour Party Policy Reviews, moves to extend inner-party democracy and the Social and Liberal Democrat document..."

I am astounded! Where is this extension of inner-party democracy? There must be many people here who want to ask you where it is, because they'll want to go and claim some of it! Right now most of them are fighting battles to preserve what little democracy remains in the Labour Party. So that passage in the manifesto I can see as nothing else than an attempt to crawl to Bryan Gould and ignore every objective development concerning inner-party democracy in the Labour Party.

You want to have an alliance with the likes of the Democrats to move away from the old bureaucratic Labourism. But that's another circle that can't be squared.

David Marquand often writes in *Marxism Today*. He's one of the theoretical leaders of the Democrats. What is his verdict on what has happened to the Labour Party?

"There can be no doubt that Labour has broken with the insular fundamentalism of the late '70s and early '80s. It has become another European social-democratic party, committed to the EC and a mixed economy. Give or take the odd detail here and there, Labour has now embraced the revisionist social democracy of the '60s and '70s, the social democracy for which Gaitskell fought, Crossman campaigned and the Gang of Four left the Labour Party."

The Labour Party has returned to Harold Wilson's bankrupt politics of 1964. The Democrats — apart from what they themselves stand for — laud that development and say it's a wonderful thing that Labour has moved rightwards. You've got a big problem telling us that that's a genuine modernising development! What's actually happened is that the Labour Party leaders have resurrected the old Labourism of the '60s and '70s. It couldn't answer the problems that capitalism posed then, and it can't answer the questions capitalism poses now.

So what you get when you read through the 'New Times' manifesto, and listen to Mark speak is, I think, a series of very strange pictures; it's like when you enter a hall lined with mirrors which distort everything. It is almost as if you can see them talking out of two sides of their mouths at once.

For instance, by your role inside the labour movement you bolster the right-wing of the Labour Party. Yet you tell us that it was bureaucratic Labourism that led to the labour movement's crisis

in the first place. You praise the new Labour Party internal democracy and then you tell us that you're for the Labour Party ending its old culture of refusing to have a dialogue with the 'social movements'. Well, argue that with Black Sections, argue that with women's sections, argue that with the people in Vauxhall who've just had a candidate imposed on them because the Labour Party wanted a safe white candidate.

The actual role you play in the movement is in flat contradiction with the good left phrases you offer us here, and which we can all agree with. You talk of a Labour Party that needs to mobilise, campaign, participate — yet you back up the leadership which sets its face like flint against any such mobilisations and campaigns — think, for example, of the role Neil Kinnock played in the miners' strike. There's a whole set of contradictions there.

Two brief points. One is on the trade unions: the idea that the trade union development of the '60s and '70s was just sectionalist, greedy militancy — which is what Eric Hobsbawm says — simply misses the whole point about how socialism is achieved.

In the '60s and '70s you had workers who were fighting, struggling against the restructuring of capital you were talking about. By and large they were defensive struggles; workers wanted to say no to the developments that took place. The question for socialists is: what particular development could have related to that, hooked into it, generalised it, politicised it?

The Labour government of the time despised that militancy, attacked the stewards' movement, did their best to beat that working class creativity down. You play the left face of that broad current which dismisses working class militancy as a squalid nuisance when you support politicians like John Smith, Bryan Gould and the rest of them. Like you, they dismiss it as sectionalist and greedy. In your attempt to theorise your attitude here in terms of Leninism, you falsify and distort the whole Marxist notion of economism: nothing in Lenin — or Marx — condemns workers because naturally they defend their material interests. Nothing in Marx or Lenin dismisses the economic class struggle as irrelevant to socialism — quite the opposite. The question is, can Marxists key into that struggle and raise it to the level of adequate working class politics? But you take economism to mean that those defensive struggles are in themselves wrong and greedy and all the rest of it: you simply miss out on the whole dynamic of the elemental class struggle!

The last point is this: the deep, deep utopianism of the strategy outlined by the CP. The document says: "It is vital that opposition parties meet their responsibility to society by settling differences and agreeing priorities." That means that Michael Heseltine, the Greens, the Democrats and the Labour Party have got to get together and settle their differences for the sake of the *nation*. The word 'society' is actually a figleaf for the real word, 'nation'.

That is, at best, Jo Grimond Liberalism: the notion that class conflict can be ended by political parties! It's the bureaucratic notion that the classes have been replaced by parties and they can somehow get together and settle differences from 'on top'.

A whole series of problems are, in the CPGB document, 'solved' in this way by the imaginary future 'progressive alliance': "These issues can be resolved in a progressive way. They will not usher in socialism but would mean that society would move onto a more sustainable pattern of development" — this is under a coalition government, remember, of the parties that we have talked about. "The global and national ecological crisis could be solved" — remember all this is under capitalism. "The internationalisation of production, power and politics, the crisis of social cohesion, care and compassion, the crisis of male society, the future of work, the modernisation of the economy..." — it doesn't specify whether it's capitalist or whatever, but capitalist it is — "the future of British democracy, the future of the British nation," etc. can be dealt with.

There is a deep-going utopianism about the idea that a coalition government could solve the problems. It is a return to the idea — and this is where I think you are precisely post-Marxist! — that capitalism is a system which can be made to work for the workers. The whole debate comes down to something as simple as that.

There's a section in the manifesto where it says, let's get away from this old notion that the market and the plan are somehow counterposed to each other: comrades, they are just two technical ways of doing things. Now you cannot get any more post-Marxist than the notion that the market economy doesn't structure into it and carry with it specific social relations which carry with them exploitation, inequality, lack of democracy, poverty — but that's how far the 'Communist Party' has gone.

To sum up, I think you have moved — whether you want to say it or not — decisively away from the notion that the working class can change the world. You now believe that the changes in capitalism have taken away the proletariat's capacity to do so. For the prosecution of the class struggle you want to substitute a deeply utopian and reactionary political project to tie the working class and the Labour Party into a new Popular Front broad class alliance. 'Post-Marxist' indeed!

Mark Perryman's reply to discussion

The first thing that Alan did which is quite traditional in debates on *Marxism Today* was to use a quote from, as he put it, the bourgeois press. So he chose Ed Pearce from the *Sunday Times*.

If somebody in the *Sunday Times* says something nice about *Marxism Today* and the Communist Party, it doesn't worry me an inch. If they say something nasty about us, it

doesn't worry me an inch. If they say something good, I use it; if they say something bad, I don't use it. But don't try to portray my politics by what someone else says about me. Similarly, I wouldn't go to the SWP to find out what Socialist Organiser says, I'd go to Socialist Organiser. I think we should be fair on one another.

The point that it's not a simple change from a Fordist world to a post-Fordist world — I completely agree. Let's use another trend, Modernism and post-Modernism. You could drive around London and you could see a very new building which is post-Modern, Camden Sainsbury's. Drive a bit further, you see the Lloyds building in the City of London. You couldn't get more Modern than that, but they were both built around the same time. So it's not a simple shift from one era to another era, so there's no disagreement on that.

The point that post-Fordism will create good times for the left: yes, that is a possibility, it's also a possibility that it will create even more desperate times than we've faced for the last ten years. It's for us to grasp the opportunity.

Alan was doubtful about changes in the workforce, and he talked about international developments. But *Marxism Today's* main, almost exclusive, area of coverage is domestic British politics, so where we talk about changes in class, we're actually talking about changes in the domestic British working class.

Alan made use of the quote "All things solid melt into air", which recognises that capitalism is a dynamic force. Another favourite quote which is, if you like, a watchword for Marx was, "Nothing is constant but change", which points to the need to rethink and review politics constantly.

Alan seemed to think that we were very soft and pro-Kinnockite on the Labour Party. Well, just a couple of quotes on the Labour Party from the 'Manifesto for New Times': "Despite repeated attempts at renewal, Labour as yet appears incapable of illuminating a vision of social progress which matches the needs and aspirations of the New Times." Again: "Labour's crisis is not a set of election defeats, its crisis is its failure to modernise alongside the social and economic forces which are creating the society of the 1990s. Most of the Labour Party seem stuck in the quagmire of the past." They may be different criticisms than you want to make of the Labour leadership, but they are as critical.

The point about sectionalism, that we're too critical of sectionalism and portray wage militancy as greed: we're simply putting forward that wage militancy is not enough, which I think is a revolutionary Marxist position.

You say that we support Gould, John Smith, etc. Just because we have them in our magazine doesn't mean that we necessarily support them. We want to engage with them, we want to be in the mainstream. I would have thought a successful Workers' Liberty is where you're not debating with Mark Perryman but where you're debating with Bryan Gould, or Sean Matgama against Neil Kinnock. That's the sort of world you want to be in, but you're not going to agree with the person whom you're debating.

We've never been criticised for being 'utopian'. This is obviously a new criticism; we're usually criticised for being pessimistic, so it's been a complete about-face on our part, not on your part because you remain critical whatever we say. But it is good to know we've turned from being the downhill pessimists to the gung-ho utopians.

Going on and on about long words rather flies in the face of the points Alan was making in his introduction and veers towards anti-intellectualism. I would warn you to be careful about that.

Our political proposals aren't new: I agree. Frankly we use the word 'new' as a bit of ~~hyperbole~~ *Marxism Today's* cover of *Marxism Today* its sales went right up.

I'm not saying that flexibility or diversity will help the working class, it won't. Like post-Fordism generally, it can create a good situation for the working class movement, or it can create a bad situation: it's our task to address those changes and create the best possible situation out of it. But you are putting forward an either/or position: you're either with us, or you're against us, which puts the possibility of real dialogue absolutely out of the window.

Finally, Alan's last criticism was, that if I was honest, I would be a post-Marxist. Well, we haven't reached that stage yet, but we might one day.

Alan Johnson's reply

First, the *Labour Party*. Mark argues that he is not, effectively, supporting Kinnockism by quoting something from 'New Times' which says that the Labour Party hasn't modernised enough yet. Yes, 'New Times' says that. But 'New Times' also says: "The first signs of modernisation are appearing with the Labour Party's Policy Reviews."

If you support the "modernisation" of the Policy Reviews, which are an unmistakable throwback to the managerial capitalism of Harold Wilson, then I can't see how you can honestly deny supporting the right wing inside the Labour Party.

The discussion about language from the floor here today: I agree, to some extent, that there was a danger of anti-intellectualism. *Marxism Today* deals with complex ideas which require long words and you can't explain every idea in the language of the *Daily Mirror*. The problem lies somewhere else. A lot of the theories we have heard are based on a notion that language, words, are completely malleable, that words do not mean anything in and of themselves, that you can do anything with words if you just interpret them and relate them to other words in a particular way.

For instance, in the 'New Times' manifesto you get notions like "We must modernise the British economy"; "The market can provide incentives and discipline". Now, if these words are broken down, we find concrete meanings. You imply that "markets exercise discipline in a certain way, but it's a discipline we can manipulate if we take it in a certain way, in our direction, in the direction of socialism"; but the discipline the market imposes is not something to do with ideas or language, it is an actual material reality. It coerces the worker within the capital-labour relationship, and that relationship contains the conflict between classes, and working class exploitation by capital.

The working class and the social movements: it is not true that you say, like us, militancy is not enough. You say much more than that. Bea Campbell says: 'militancy is male, it is bad. We must reapportion the national cake and give more to lower paid workers, and that can be done by way of the well organised workers abandoning strikes and taking lower wages'. That pernicious nonsense is clearly argued by Beatrix Campbell and by a whole number of other people inside the Communist Party who say that militancy is greedy and bad.

Obviously the working class is fragmented and divided. There is a bad political culture inside the movement on oppressions around gender and race. The solution which comes out from *Militant*, for example, which is

basically to ignore those issues and talk about bread-and-butter issues, is grossly inadequate.

But the Beatrix Campbell approach is also inadequate — the approach based on identity politics. We look to events such as the miners' strike and the heat produced by class struggle, combined with autonomous organisation such as Women Against Pit Closures. During the miners' strike bedrock class struggle and autonomous organisation forged together in a very particular way, and the whole was more than the sum of the parts, which, by themselves, would not have carried the force they had in living, creative combination.

Abstracted from class struggle, from active class battle, those autonomous organisations do not themselves possess the strength or the capacity to increase the overall strength of the working class, that they have when they fuse together inside the class struggle itself.

I don't think the problem lies in the idea of "the plurality of contestations" Mark talked about. That is just a fairly unclear way of repeating something Lenin said long ago: that to expect that the working class will line up in massed ranks over here, and the bosses line up over there, and then they'll set to and engage each other on an open battlefield — that is just ludicrous. Capitalist society is far more complex than that. There are, obviously, many, many conflicts and contradictions within it, as well as the basic worker-capitalist conflict.

I don't think that classical Marxism had a problem with that, but it did rightly assert the centrality of the main contradiction, that between labour and capital. It sought to explain and progress some of the other conflicts via and through the conflict between labour and capital.

An example: take Solidarnosc in Poland. I think that the Polish working class has been the biggest and best example in recent times of Marx's notion of the working class as the universal class, a class which can liberate itself and draw in its train, by its struggles, the rest of society. Solidarnosc was able, by its very struggle, to draw in behind it the kinds of conflicts that are not reducible to class that Mark talked about. The other way to handle this "plurality of contestations" is the way that you have allowed writers in *Marxism Today* to handle it, talking about the working class no longer being a revolutionary class, that the whole working class socialist project is a matter of history, that what we are now talking about is radical individualism and popular democracy.

One last point: "In society the labour movement now is like the man at the party nobody will talk to" — as Mark put it. But why will nobody talk to us at the party? Just carry the analogy on. Why would no-one want to talk to the labour movement at this imaginary party? You'd get to the party and people would say, "Oh my god, they're here again, do you remember in 1929 when they came in, they didn't bring anything to drink and pinched all ours! Then in 1979 they smashed the bottle over our heads and told us it was in our interests."

That is what's missing entirely from your picture — the role that Labour governments have played so far. One after another Labour governments have played an awful role, given socialism a bad name, acted against workers' interests, etc. But why do you remain silent on that? For one clear reason — you have to, for how could you possibly criticise past Labour governments from the left, when you are trying to recruit allies to the right of the Labour establishment?

In a nutshell, this is why you can't develop a strategy for the working class. If you are hooked up with the construction of a Popular Front alliance of people well to the right of the Labour Party, how can you come to terms with the legacy of reformism?