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**The Politics of Marxism Today**

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## The politics of *Marxism Today*

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**Marxism Today**, the theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain, has been transformed since 1977 from a rather dull monthly of interest only, if at all, to CP members to a lively, attractively produced and controversial magazine widely read on the left. The change has something to do with style – the replacement of old Party workhorse James Klugmann with the present editor, Martin Jacques. Fundamentally, however, it reflects the emergence of a new theoretical and political current, the Eurocommunist wing of the party, which has not only played a major role in precipitating the present split in the CP, but seeks to bring about a more general re-alignment of the left.

Ralph Miliband aptly described the politics of this tendency recently when he called it the ‘new revisionism’, marking ‘a very pronounced retreat from some socialist positions.’ [1] The essence of this retreat was correctly summarized by some supporters of the **Morning Star** wing of the Communist Party, the authors of the widely discussed pamphlet **Class Politics**: ‘there has been a shift away from, even an abandonment of, the central role of class and class conflict in the analysis and formation of political strategy.’ [2]

There are three reasons for discussing the politics of the new revisionism in this journal. The first is that theirs are not simply ideas formulated by a few left-wing academics with no effect on broader movements and struggles. Eurocommunist politics has an important influence on two key left-led Areas of the National Union of Mineworkers, Scotland and South Wales. The dire effects which this had on the conduct of the miners' strike became evident during its final stage, when a number of South Wales NUM officials took the initiative in engineering a return to work, with disastrous consequences for victimized miners. [3] We are discussing ideas with material effects.

Secondly, while **Marxism Today** has taken the initiative of formulating the main themes of the new revisionism, they are of much greater currency. Miliband rightly talks of 'a *spectrum of thought* in which are to be found many different positions and points of emphasis, put forward by people who belong to different generations, traditions, parties and movements, and who do not necessarily agree with each other on many important issues'. [4] What is at stake in the debates these ideas have provoked is less the fate of the Communist Party, increasingly a matter only of interest to antiquarians, than in the future of the entire working-class movement, and more particularly of the Labour Party. Eric Hobsbawm's writings in **Marxism Today** have been of significance primarily in lending support to Neil Kinnock's strategy of steering Labour rightwards. Hobsbawm himself is perfectly clear about this: 'The strangest thing about the present debates within the Communist Party is that (apart from the issue of loyalty to the USSR) there is nothing specifically communist about them.' (April '85, p. 12) [5] In the wake of the miners' defeat, sections of the Labour left are already making their peace with the party leadership, most notably in the case of the capitulation of the GLC and Sheffield City Council over ratecapping. The role of the new revisionism is both to legitimize and to hasten this retreat.

The third reason for considering the ‘Marxism’ of **Marxism Today** has to do with the sort of criticism it has received. It is not just that many opponents of the new revisionism are tainted by their association with the Stalinism of the **Morning Star** wing of the CP – this is true, for example, of the **Class Politics** group. Even the most cogent critique, Ralph Miliband’s admirable article in the 25th anniversary issue of the **New Left Review**, which I warmly commend, fails fully to grasp the political logic of the Eurocommunists’ arguments. The reason is even critics such as Miliband, and certainly CP Stalinists, share with **Marxism Today** its central strategic concept, that of a ‘broad alliance’ as the precondition of an eventual overthrow of capital. Yet unless this concept is rejected the new revisionism cannot be effectively combatted. A main aim of the present article is to demonstrate this.

## **The Eurocommunist analysis and strategy**

The core of the Eurocommunist case can be stated in three propositions: (1) the labour movement is in serious crisis as a result of its decline in recent years; (2) capital is, by contrast, on the offensive, and has succeeded in establishing a new form of class rule, ‘authoritarian populism’, involving both direct ideological appeal to the masses and greater reliance on coercion; (3) the left’s only hope of recovery from its present travails lies in the construction of a broad democratic alliance against Thatcherism, which is the political expression of authoritarian populism. Let us consider these three propositions more closely.

(1) *The decline of the labour movement.* This is, of course, the famous ‘Hobsbawm thesis’, stated by CP historian Eric Hobsbawm in his famous Marx Memorial Lecture, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, and published in **Marxism Today** in

September 1978. Hobsbawm's argument needs to be carefully stated in order to disentangle it from two other claims with which it is frequently confused. (It should be said that much of this confusion is Hobsbawm's own doing.)

The first of the propositions from which the Hobsbawm thesis must be distinguished is that of the disappearance of the working class. Hobsbawm does not argue, like Andre Gorz, that the proletariat is in the course of social and physical disintegration. He says, for example, that Marx's prediction of 'capitalism gradually proletarianising most of the population, ie transforming them into wage-labourers' was 'an extremely valid one' (March '83 p. 11). Commenting on my claim that 'the working class is the overwhelming majority of the population' [6], Hobsbawm writes: 'It is obviously true that the bulk of the population of working age, insofar as they are not unemployed, are in one way or another employed for wages/salaries' (March '84 p. 9).

Stuart Hall, apart from Hobsbawm the most eloquent exponent of the new revisionism, takes much the same stand. Thus, during a debate with Tony Benn at **Marxism Today's** *Left Alive* discussion weekend last November, he said:

I am afraid I think Tony Benn grossly misrepresented the question of class by caricaturing our argument as if we had advanced some notion that class is disappearing or the class system has been abolished, and with it the basis of the socialist case. No one could seriously sustain such a position. (January '85, p. 18)

Equally, however, the Hobsbawm thesis should not be confused with the analysis, developed in this journal and elsewhere, of the 'downturn', i.e. of the shift in the balance of class forces in capital's favour since 1974. [7] Norah Carlin and Ian Birchall make this mistake in their otherwise very helpful survey of Hobsbawm's views: 'Hobsbawm, to his credit, knew a downturn when he saw one.' [8]

Hobsbawm's analysis of working-class decline both antedates, and is quite different from our own theory of the downturn. Thus

he said, in a talk given in May 1974: 'I do not believe that the labour and socialist movement is on the offensive. It is on the defensive against the forces of reaction' (October '74, p. 308). Less than three months before Hobsbawm gave this talk the miners' strike had precipitated the fall of the Heath government; less than a month previously, the Caetano dictatorship in Portugal was overthrown by the Armed Forces Movement, creating the closest Western Europe has been to a revolutionary situation since the Second World War; the working class in Spain was unleashing a storm of strikes threatening the future of the Francoist regime; world capitalism was reeling under the impact of the first great post-war slump. And yet, for Hobsbawm the workers' movement was 'on the defensive'. Why?

To answer this question we have to consider from when Hobsbawm dates the beginning of labour's decline. His original 1978 lecture was a broad survey of trends since the 1870s, painting a picture of steady advance and then gradual decline beginning after the Second World War: 'the forward march of British labour ... began to falter thirty years ago.' (September '78, p. 286) Elsewhere he is more precise, writing of '*the peak of its forward march* (1951)' (April '85, p. 10, italics in original). What happened in 1951? The answer is that the Labour Party, even though it lost the general election of that year, won a record number of votes. On the next page Hobsbawm makes the point slightly more explicit when he writes of 'the halting and reversal of Labour's forward march.' (April '85, p. 11) The capital 'L' is highly significant: the Hobsbawm thesis identifies the fate of the working class with the electoral fortunes of reformist parties.

Hobsbawm might put it another way, saying that what he is concerned with is less class structure, i.e. the objective position of the working class within capitalist society, than class consciousness, the way in which workers respond politically and ideologically to their situation. But it comes to the same thing: 'if we look at the political expression of class consciousness, which means in practice, support for the Labour Party ...'

(September '78, p. 285). More recently, Hobsbawm has generalised this analysis, in which the electoral weakness of the reformist parties is made to stand for the overall position of the working class, to the whole of Western Europe. [9]

What are the causes of decline thus measured? Two factors seem to stand out. One is the decline in the proportion of manual workers in the employed population. Thus, 'the manual working class, core of traditional socialist labour parties, is today contracting and not expanding. It has been transformed, and to some extent divided, by the decades when its standard of living reached levels undreamed of even by the well-paid in 1939.' (October '82, p. 11) Although Hobsbawm says he doesn't think the working class is disappearing, he does tend to identify the proletariat with manual workers and so to attribute the shrinking Labour vote to their numerical decline; 'we can no longer rely on an absolute majority of proletarian Britain to sweep a Labour government in single-handed.' (April '85, p. 10) No wonder that some have confused his arguments with Gorz's.

Other **Marxism Today** theorists have taken up the same theme in a rather clearer, and less electoralist fashion. Stuart Hall argues that the working class is experiencing a process of 'recomposition' and that 'changes in the structure and composition of the working class are likely to affect the industrial structure and political culture of the labour movement.' (November '82, p. 17) The movement currently in decline rested on the predominance of male, skilled and semi-skilled manual workers. The 'culture' associated with them involved four main features – a defensive economism focusing on narrow trade-union issues rather than broader political questions; a sectionalist militancy which meant that struggle divided rather than united the class; a formalist and hierarchical approach to organisation; and a reliance on the state rather than workers' self-activity to achieve reforms. (November '82, p. 20)

Sectionalism and economism are also the second main ingredient in Hobsbawm's diagnosis of working-class decline.

Thus: 'it seems to me that we now see a growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interests irrespective of the rest.' (September '78, p. 284) Strikes now tend to affect, not the bosses, but 'the public, i.e. ... other workers (e.g. by power blackouts or whatever) ... In the nature of things such sectional forms of struggle not only create potential friction between groups of workers, but risk weakening the hold of the labour movement as a whole.' (September '78, p. 284) Militancy has grown, but this has been 'an almost entirely *economist* militancy ... The periods of maximum strike activity since 1960 – 1970–2 and 1974 – have been the ones when the percentage of pure wage strikes have been much the highest' (September '78, p. 286).

The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that the labour movement must break from what is described, following Gramsci, as an 'economic-corporate' mode of conduct, and project itself as a 'national-popular force' exercising ideological and political hegemony over society. Thus Stuart Hall argues:

The left must ... be able, on its own programme, with its own project, to engage the society as a whole, to generalize itself throughout society, to bring over strategic popular majorities on the key issues, to win converts, first of all among those sectors of its class and those who can come into alliance with it, but who have in recent years not supported it. But, secondly, to make converts to its cause, to carry the case to a widening set of constituencies, to polarize the society in new ways towards the left, to connect with new experiences in society, to engage with its increasing complexity, and in that way to make socialism grow in relevance to the emerging experiences as well as the traditional experiences of our time. (January '85, p. 17)

What Hall is advocating will become clearer when we consider the other two main elements of the Eurocommunist analysis.

(2) *Thatcherism and authoritarian populism*. The key text of the new revisionist theory of Thatcherism is *The Great Moving*



*Right Show*, a brilliant article by Hall first published in **Marxism Today** of January 1979, while Labour was still in office. His central claim is that Thatcherism is ‘a new political formation’, whose successes represent ‘a political defeat, a political throwback, a reversal of a very profound kind.’ (January ’85, pp. 16, 17)

Expressing the point in terms borrowed from Gramsci, Hall argues that Thatcherism is a response to the ‘organic crisis’ of British capitalism, an attempt ‘to cure within certain limits’ its ‘incurable structural contradictions’ by creating a new balance of forces. [10] Its emergence, and success are a consequence of the contradictions of social democracy. The Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970 claimed to represent the working class, but at the same time used the state apparatus through incomes policy and the like to discipline its own supporters on behalf of capital. This enabled Thatcher and the radical Tory right to link the traditional anti-statism of *laissez faire* economics (Hayek, Friedman etc.) with an anti-bureaucratic populism. This neo-liberalism is, however, all the more potent for being combined with some of the traditional themes of mainstream paternalist Toryism, with, above all, a stress on the family and nation as the larger units within which individuals find their meaning. Thus,

Thatcherite populism is a particularly rich mix. It combines the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism ... ‘Free market-strong state’: around this contradictory point, where neo-liberalpolitical economy fused with organic Toryism, the authentic language of ‘Thatcherism’ has condensed. It began to be spoken in the mid-1970s – and, in its turn, to ‘speak’ – to define – the crisis: what it was and how to get out of it. The crisis has begun to be ‘lived’ in its terms. This is a new kind of taken-for-grantedness; a reactionary common sense, harnessed to the practices and solutions of the radical right and the class forces it now aspires to represent. [11]

The effect, Hall argues, has been to create a political and ideological repertoire which permitted Thatcher to outflank Labour and appeal directly to many of its working-class supporters. The haemorrhage of Labour voters rightwards in the 1979 and 1983 general elections can obviously be taken as confirmation of this diagnosis.

However, Thatcherism represents, according to Hall, more than an electorally successful vehicle for the Tory right. Its emergence marks a broader re-alignment of class forces and a transformation of the capitalist state in Britain. Hall describes Thatcherism as 'move towards "authoritarian populism" – an exceptional form of the capitalist state which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institutions in place and which has at the same time been able to construct around itself an active popular consent. This undoubtedly represents a decisive shift in the balance of forces'. [12]

The expression 'exceptional state' was not invented by Hall. It is a theoretical concept introduced by Nicos Poulantzas in his book *Fascism and Dictatorship* in order to analyse a certain class of capitalist states which emerge when the existing form of bourgeois rule cracks as a result of internal conflicts and popular resistance. Among Poulantzas's 'exceptional states' are fascism and military dictatorship. Now Hall and other **Marxism Today** theorists are careful to distinguish Thatcherism from fascism: Hobsbawm, for example, says that 'it obviously isn't ... like fascism' (April '85. p. 7). Nevertheless Hall's description of Thatcherite authoritarian populism as 'an exceptional form of the capitalist state' suggests that it involves a break with bourgeois democracy which has reduced representative institutions largely to a facade. We shall return to this issue below.

Clearly this analysis reinforces the pessimism of *Marxism Today's* view of the situation. Not only has the forward march of labour been halted, but the bourgeoisie are aggressively on the

offensive, having promoted a new form of class rule which further weakens the political influence of the working class. Hence the need for drastic measures on the left's part in order to begin to reverse the situation.

(3) *The broad democratic alliance*. According to Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, this response must involve both the 'transformation of the labour movement', and 'the construction by the labour movement of the broadest possible set of alliances against Thatcherism involving, in the initial instance, quite modest objectives'. [13]

The concept of the broad democratic alliance (BDA) was first espoused by the Communist Party in the 1977, revised version of **The British Road to Socialism**, although its roots go back, of course, much further, to the Popular Fronts of the 1930s (of which more below). **The British Road to Socialism** advocates 'a broad democratic alliance' which 'would embrace the great majority of the people, and be overwhelmingly superior in numbers and strength to the forces which want to maintain the *status quo*' by uniting all those 'social forces and movements ... involved in the battle for an extension of democracy.' [14]

The CP envisages there being two main elements in the BDA. The first is the labour movement; the working class would be the 'leading force in the alliance', since its 'strength and capacity for organization enables it to give leadership to all the democratic forces in society.' [15] However, 'the broad democratic alliance needs to be not only an expression of class forces, but of other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression not always directly connected with the relations of production.' [16] These are what Jon Bloomfield calls the 'people's movements', as opposed to the 'working-class movement' – the women's movement, the black movement, the peace movement, Scottish and Welsh nationalism, etc. [17]

Originally the BDA had been envisaged as achieving the ‘next stage in the revolutionary process’, namely a ‘new kind of Labour government’ which would, rather than merely administer capitalism, implement an ‘alternative economic strategy’ of import controls, state direction of investment, etc. [18] However, since the advent of Thatcherism the alliance’s aim has become much narrower and more defensive, focusing on what Hall and Jacques call ‘quite modest objectives’.

Essentially these objectives come down to the constitutional removal of the Thatcher government. This aim can only be achieved through a general election, and the question naturally arises of what electoral alignment can act as the political representatives of the BDA. The answer given by the **Marxism Today** team is: one embracing elements of the Liberal/SDP Alliance and even ‘progressive’ Tories such as Francis Pym and Ted Heath. Hobsbawm advanced the idea in the wake of Labour’s 1983 election catastrophe. In a notorious article, *Labour’s Lost Millions*, he argued that ‘some way of uniting the majority of British people which is opposed to Toryism must be found’, and suggested that if Labour could not win back those ‘lost millions’ then ‘it will have to learn how to lead a broad front of other parties or their supporters in backing Labour’s policy’ (October ’83 p. 9). In the ensuing furore Hobsbawm stuck by his guns, insisting that ‘the need to unite the anti-Thatcher forces by electoral arrangements in four years’ time’ would be ‘the second worst outcome in British politics’, but still ‘preferable to the worst outcome, another Thatcher victory.’ [19]

Hobsbawm’s first preference, however, is that the Labour Party itself should become the BDA, or rather that it should return to its old, pre-Bennite role of a ‘broad church’ embracing left, right and centre. This strategy, however, raises the broader question of the part played by the Communist Party and **Marxism Today** in the crisis of the Labour left, to which let us now turn.

## The CP's moving right show

The 1977 revision of the **British Road to Socialism** left the CP in something of a dilemma about its *raison d'être*. The objective of a 'new type of Labour government' which would, with popular support, implement the alternative economic strategy was identical to that of the Bennite left inside the Labour Party, then girding its loins for the great offensive of 1979–81, when they forced through two major constitutional reforms (election of the leader by the entire party, mandatory reselection of parliamentary candidates), helped to precipitate the replacement of James Callaghan by Michael Foot, and nearly secured Tony Benn's election as deputy leader. The CP was irrelevant to this process: the Labour left's theory, such as it was, was provided by Benn himself and by others such as the economist Stuart Holland; the organising muscle came from Bennite *groupuscules* such as the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and the Labour Co-ordinating Committee.

More fundamentally, if the agency of socialist change was to be a radicalised Labour Party, why on earth stay in the CP, especially when the Bennites were apparently succeeding in shifting Labour leftwards? The answer the **British Road to Socialism** gave was that 'the Labour left still lacks a clear political perspective, is not centrally organized, and is not sufficiently related to the many extra-parliamentary movements and struggles'. [20] Hence the need for a separate Communist Party:

The Communist Party does not, however, seek to replace the Labour Party as a federal party of the working class, but rather to strengthen its original federal nature, and we see a much more influential Communist Party as crucial to the future of the Labour Party itself, and to the development of the labour movement and the broad democratic alliance as a whole. [21]

This amounted to the effective abandonment of the early Comintern's conception of its national sections as combat

parties, which sought to win support for their ideas through intervention in workers' struggles. The 1977 **British Road to Socialism** conceived rather the CP as a propaganda organisation, acting as a Marxist ginger group within the Labour Party, eventually through being allowed to affiliate directly, and therefore to enjoy a status similar to that of, say, the Fabian Society.

The **Marxism Today** team continue to hold this view of the CP. Thus Hobsbawm writes of the strategy of the SWP (and the early Communist Party) to build a revolutionary alternative to Labour:

History has shown this to be a non-starter ... In Britain there has been only one genuine mass party of the left, based on the working class and its movement, the Labour Party ... Like it or not, the future of socialism is through the Labour Party. (March '84, p. 8)

The role of Marxists within the British working-class movement has always been to provide 'groups of cadres or potential cadres, of leaders and brains rather than of followers'. [22] The CP has continued to play this part, acting as a 'political educator' (April '85, p. 12).

Hobsbawm is far from alone in this conception of Eurocommunism's role. One observer wrote recently:

**Marxism Today** claims, with some justification, to be a powerhouse of ideas for the left. Indeed, listening to its editor, Martin Jacques, one would think no one in the Labour Party ever had an idea. He argues that just as Beveridge and Keynes – both of them Liberals – provided Labour with its social and economic policies in the 1940s, many current policies, such as the alternative economic strategy and those of the GLC, owe as much to the Communists. [23]

What has changed since the CP first adopted this view of itself as a 'powerhouse of ideas' in the late 1970s is that the crisis of the Labour left has provided an opening for the Eurocommunists actually to play this role. However, they have used this opportunity, not to push Labour further leftwards, but to provide

an intellectual justification for Kinnock's project of taking the party back to the centre.

**Marxism Today** adopted a critical tone towards the Labour left even during the days of the latter's most glorious victories at the end of the 1970s. Thus Dave Prescott wrote in October 1981, at the moment of the left's greatest triumph, when they had come within a whisker of electing Benn deputy leader:

Groups and factions within the Labour Party apparatus ( **Tribune** Group, **Militant** Group, ILP, etc.) cannot even depend on winning a secure victory *inside* the Labour Party by a style of work that looks primarily inwards, into the apparatus, as its main field of work. Still less can this style of work win the masses – many of whom are not even members of trade unions – whose support is essential to an election victory. (October '81, p. 33)

Such criticisms have become stronger in the years since, as the Labour left have found themselves thrown ever further onto the defensive. Thus Stuart Hall recently attacked

the view that Tony Benn came close to justifying, that by organizing and consolidating its own already committed ranks, by strengthening and deepening those forces which are already mobilized, that that will be sufficient to win the struggle. (January '85, p. 17)

Now the SWP has been saying very similar things about the Labour left ever since the Bennite boom began in the late 1970s. The difference lies not in the criticisms made but in the political conclusions drawn from them. We argue that the failure of the Bennite attempt to transform Labour from within demonstrates the need for an independent revolutionary party which relates openly to workers when they are involved in struggle and therefore most ready to listen to socialist ideas.

The Eurocommunists have drawn the opposite conclusion, increasingly siding with Kinnock and the centre-left against the Bennites. They take this stand quite logically, as a consequence of their general strategy, namely to achieve socialism 'without civil war, by a combination of a socialist parliamentary majority

and mass struggle outside Parliament'. [24] The 'hard' Labour left scares off voters and so prevents this 'socialist parliamentary majority' from being achieved. It is the CP's electoralism which has increasingly estranged them from Benn and his followers. Thus we find Jon Bloomfield before the last election attacking

some sections of the fundamentalist left [who], along with the Trotskyist groups, want the removal of all non-socialists from the Labour Party. In effect, they want the break up of Labour's broad church, and its transformation into a genuine socialist party, no matter what the cost in electoral terms or potential loss of trade union affiliation. [25]

The attacks on the hard left have reached crescendo pitch since June 1983. The main thrust of Hobsbawm's *Labour's Lost Million* was precisely to defend the notion of Labour as a broad church, rather than his incidental but revealing espousal of coalition politics. Replying to critics he dismissed the idea of transforming Labour into 'the truly socialist mass party we would all prefer' as 'a dangerous day-dream'. He continues:

Certainly the future lies in a Labour Party which moves to the left ... But Marxists must begin by taking the Labour Party as it has actually come into being and developed to be the mass party of the left ... it has not developed as an ideologically homogeneous or unified party, but as a broad class and progressive front, containing a wide spectrum of views from the centre to the revolutionary left. (March '84, pp. 8-9)

As it has developed, so Labour must continue. Hobsbawm concludes by arguing that 'the resumption, *from any side*, of the suicidal civil war within the Labour Party ... would be a disaster'. (March '84, p. 12) Tony Benn deserves his place in the Parliamentary Labour Party, as do Denis Healey and Roy Hattersley theirs. Right and left unite behind Kinnock.

One could say, then, that the Eurocommunists have finally discovered a role as the ideologists of Kinnockism. The significance of this development shouldn't be underestimated. Of course, Labour right wingers don't need to read **Marxism**



**Today** for justifications of their politics. The same is not true, however, of a generation of Labour left-wingers, some of whom began their political lives as revolutionaries, many of whom have moved quite considerably to the right in recent years. Marxist intellectuals such as Hobsbawm and Hall, enjoying as they do considerable and deserved academic reputations, and possessing formidable talents as popularisers and polemicists, can exercise a genuine influence by providing apparently impeccable theoretical and historical reasons for abandoning ‘fundamentalist’ positions. Healey may not need Hobsbawm, but Kinnock does, in order to cover his left flank.

A number of recent developments have removed any ambiguity about the CP’s own great moving right show. One is the **Morning Star** crisis, which finally forced elements in the leadership such as general secretary Gordon McLennan who had hitherto balanced between the Stalinists and the Eurocommunists to climb off the fence and side with the **Marxism Today** faction. The latter had long been demanding stern measures against pro-Moscow elements. It is idle to speculate what finally decided the leadership to throw in their lot with the Eurocommunists: one factor may well have been the success of **Marxism Today**, and the extent to which it seemed to offer a viable role to the CP.

The miners’ strike undoubtedly served to crystallise the Communist Party’s rightist evolution. The strike, with all the panoply of class confrontation that went along with it, cut right across **Marxism Today**’s arguments in support of Kinnock’s strategy. The Eurocommunists’ hostility towards Arthur Scargill and everything he stood for was clear well before the strike.

Stuart Hall, in some ways the most ‘left’ **Marxism Today** writer in his criticisms of the Labour Party, nevertheless was prepared, the summer before the strike, to praise ‘the highly realistic miners, who have heard the cock crow thrice and each time refused to acknowledge that “Arthur” was known to them’. Hall continued:

To invite people in the tightest of economic squeezes to come out on strike when coal stocks are at record levels is to act, frankly, with the political *nous* of the leaders of the Charge of the Light Brigade. [26]

Elsewhere Hall made it clear what he meant by ‘realism’, namely an uncritical acceptance of Thatcherite economics: ‘miners are forced to base their claims to a decent life on the strategy of mining pits until the sea begins to seep through the pit floor.’ [27]

Once the strike had begun it was no longer possible to utter publicly such reactionary nonsense. Even Hobsbawm was forced to acknowledge the ‘basic strength of the labour movement’ which it showed: ‘As an historian, I cannot think of another strike which could have carried on, on that scale, for that length of time in British history and I cannot think of another country in which this would have been possible.’ (October ’84, p. 13) This didn’t make the strike any more convenient.

One device for overcoming the obstacle posed by the strike to the Eurocommunist strategy was simply to ignore it. Thus Hall wrote in an article published in September 1984, at the time when the reverberations of Orgreave swept through the working-class movement galvanising activists into prodigious efforts of solidarity and forcing the Labour and trade union leadership into grudging declarations of support for the NUM: ‘The question of the GLC and local authorities – and not just the campaign to save them – has become the most important front in the struggle against Thatcher-ism.’ This ludicrous assertion was justified by the claim that the GLC was ‘a test-bed’ for the ‘new politics’ of uniting ‘the disparate, sometimes conflicting demands of a series of social movements into a more organic social bloc’. [28]

But of course the miners’ strike couldn’t really be ignored like this. However, **Marxism Today** could still argue that the NUM should behave as if it were the GLC. NUM Scottish vice-president George Bolton indeed made the GLC his model when arguing that the miners should eschew mass picketing and

instead concentrate on winning the battle for ‘public opinion’ (September ’84, pp. 12, 13) More and more insistently as the strike went on the Eurocommunists argued that the NUM should concentrate on building a broad alliance against Thatcherism and avoid such ‘divisive’ and ‘sectional’ methods as mass picketing.

The conduct of the strike in South Wales, where **Marxism Today** ideas had a considerable influence on the NUM leadership, was held up as a model of this sort of strategy. Hywel Francis attacked the notion of the strike as ‘an industrial battle which relies essentially on what amounts to no more than a “syndicalist” strategy of industrial confrontation and regular sectional calls for a general strike and mass picketing to resolve the situation.’ (February ’85, p. 13)

In South Wales especially the strike had assumed a very different form according to Francis:

What emerges is a network of the unexpected alliances which go far beyond the traditional labour movement. It is a broad democratic alliance of a new kind – an anti- Thatcher alliance – in which the organized working class has a central role but a role which henceforth it will have to *earn* and not to *assume*.

In this potentially permanent anti-Thatcher alliance, the women’s movement and the peace movement will have prominence because, unlike the bulk of the trade union and labour movement during the run-up to the miners’ strike, they have played a crucial role in raising the political consciousness of the British people. It is even conceivable that the churches will have a part in such an alliance because they have raised very pertinent political, social and moral questions during the strike concerning the nature and role of the state and of the dehumanizing character of capitalism. (February ’85, p. 14)

As I have already noted, these ideas had serious consequences for the conduct of the miners’ strike. They were used to justify the opposition of the Scottish and South Wales NUM leaders to a blockade of the steel industry in the spring and summer of 1984; in early 1985 Eurocommunists from South Wales – Maerdy

lodge chairman Arfon Evans, for example – played a key role in railroading the miners’ union into a return to work without a settlement.

The Eurocommunists’ attack on ‘Scargillism’ plumbed new depths at the end of the strike. **Marxism Today** carried a roundtable discussion in its April 1985 issue in which Oakdale branch secretary Alan Baker, a leading Welsh CP member, declared: ‘Mass picketing was totally counter-productive – in relation to just about everything – but certainly in relation to Nottingham.’ (April ’85, p. 23)

George Bolton agreed, linking opposition to picketing to support for a ballot:

In my view the NUM could have won a ballot hands down within days of the special conference in Sheffield in April [1984]. And there was no doubt in my mind at that time that a national ballot would have been decisive for the strike. Now if the mass picketing in Nottinghamshire the month before hadn’t taken place, if you’d had a series of mass rallies in Nottingham, together with the special conference and the change of the ballot percentage rule, then in my view we could have won the national ballot and, against that different background, Notts would have come out. (April ’85, p. 24)

The truth was the reverse: the Yorkshire pickets had remarkable success in pulling out the Nottinghamshire pits until they were blocked by their own Area officials and those from Notts, and by the police scab operation. [29] The main point to note, however, is that the Eurocommunist wing of the CP made the miners’ defeat the occasion of an onslaught against what Hywel Francis called ‘the very traditional, almost archaic, solely industrial strategy of mass and flying picketing’ (April ’85, p. 31)

This offensive was part of a generally more aggressive stance on the CP’s part, in which they presented themselves as the agents of left re-alignment. One notable occasion of this was a debate between Ken Livingstone and Bea Campbell at **Marxism Today’s** *Left Alive* weekend in November 1984. As we have

already seen, Livingstone's skilful cultivation of a 'public opinion' ranging from separatist feminists to the House of Lords had made him emblematic of the broad alliance the Eurocommunists hoped to construct.

In line with this, Campbell praised the 'new alliance' between the Labour Party and the 'social movements' represented by the GLC. However, she then took Livingstone to task for co-operating with elements of the Trotskyist hard left within the Labour Party complaining bitterly about his conversations with Tariq Ali. [30] Her motivation for this attack was more than mere Trot-baiting (though Campbell combines a virulently anti-working class version of Eurocommunism with a traditionally Stalinoid hatred of Trotskyists). She identified, in opposition to the 'new alliance' another 'deeply sectarian project', namely

another alliance happening somewhere else, between the old Trotskyist far left, the Labour Party hard left and sectarians within the Communist Party. Basically, they want to rehabilitate a view of politics and class struggle which is unreconstructed. (December '84, p. 26)

One notable feature of Campbell's attack was the way in which it generalised the debate inside the CP between Eurocommunists and Stalinists. Others did the same. Thus Dave Cook, discussing the **Morning Star** wrote:

Although the language of this argument is internal to the Communist Party (no one else on the left talks in terms of the broad democratic alliance) the content is central to the situation facing socialists in all parties ...

... common cause is being made between Communist Party hardliners and the **Morning Star**, some of the Labour Party left often called the hard left, and 'entrists' socialists who have gone into the Labour Party in some force since 1979. This is being experienced within CND, sometimes within the trade unions, in theoretical argument, and in 'inner' Labour Party struggle.

On the other side are the Communist Party majority, that section of the Labour Party differentiating itself from more

‘fundamentalist’ positions, and a range of activists in broad movements like CND. Similar trends can be traced within the unions in the differentiation between the broad left and BLOC. (February ’85, pp. 28–9)

This distinction between ‘realists’ and ‘fundamentalists’ acquires an especial significance in the light of developments inside the Labour Party in early 1985. Patrick Seyd described these as

the growing realignment of the Labour left being led by key elements of the former Bennite campaign and in the new municipal left (henceforth, the ‘new left’).

The new left are trying to create room in the Labour Party for a more popular and realistic democratic socialist politics, for a third force independent alike of the right and ultraleft. They are distancing themselves ... from the positions which Tony Benn, the former leader of the left, has recently been adopting. They are, indeed, preparing to recreate and redefine Bennism, if necessary, without Benn. [31]

‘Wilsonism without Wilson’ might be an apter description. Sections of the Labour left are making their peace with the party establishment, their minds concentrated with the debacle of June 1983, the miners’ defeat, and the real, if uncertain possibility of Labour forming the next government. [32] Among the signs of this re-alignment listed by Seyd are the emergence of a group on Labour’s National Executive Committee of former Bennites (David Blunkett, Michael Meacher, Tom Sawyer) prepared to work with Kinnock; **Tribune**’s break with Benn and the hard left; the capitulation of left Labour councils, notably the GLC and Sheffield, over rate-capping.

Of these developments perhaps the most striking was what **Marxism Today** called ‘Ken’s Turn’ in London, coming as it did within a few days of the miners’ return to work. The May 1985 issue of the magazine carried an interview with Livingstone, in which a gleeful Bea Campbell tried to prod him into a final break with the hard left while the GLC leader, as

slippery as ever, sought to evade these pressures but still admitted his growing sympathy with the ‘participatory wing of the party’, as he chose to describe the soft left (May ’85, p. 12).

**Marxism Today** has thus been at the centre of the re-alignment of the Labour left, successfully exploiting the crisis of Bennism and the demoralising effects of the defeats of the British workers’ movement has suffered since 1979. The ideas of the new revisionism matter. What, then, is there to be said for them?

## **Thatcherism and the working class**

The two key propositions of the Eurocommunist analysis are that the forward march of labour has been halted, and that Thatcherism marks the advent of a new form of class rule. Since I intend to criticise both assertions let me first say something in their favour. The merit of **Marxism Today** has been its willingness to look unpalatable realities in the face. This has been a comparatively rare attribute on the left in recent years. It is difficult to read Tony Benn’s speech at ‘Left Alive’ last year, with its blithe optimism and insistence on the ‘power of moral argument’ (January ’85, p. 14) and not to feel that one is in the presence of a mind that has lost much contact with reality. Stuart Hall’s reply, insisting as it does on a realistic appraisal of the balance of class forces, is incomparably more sober and serious.

However, there is realism and realism. Hall quotes, on this and on many other occasions, Romain Rolland’s saying, taken up by Gramsci: ‘Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will’. [33] The phrase has its uses, but it is ultimately an undialectical way of putting things. It suggests that reality is harsh and unyielding, constantly frustrating the ‘optimistic’ will which, in defiance of reason, seeks to transform it. One can respond to reality thus viewed in one of two ways – ultra-left

voluntarism or reformist adaption, suicide or surrender. Marxism is distinguished from other forms of socialism precisely by its claim that the possibility of social transformation depends on the existence of tendencies in reality itself working towards that transformation. The point of socialist organisation is to act on those tendencies, identifying in every conjuncture ‘What is to be Done?’ Rolland’s formula obscures this interaction between Marxist theory and social reality, mediated by the revolutionary party.

The most important of the tendencies analysed by Marx was of course capitalism’s propensity to form within production the class with the power to overthrow it, namely the proletariat. The Hobsbawm thesis bears centrally on this question. It is difficult not to agree with John Westergaard when he says that such claims about working-class decline employ a method which

tends to rediscover long-standing trends as if they were startling new events; makes sweeping generalizations on slender or ambiguous facts helped along with a generous dollop of guesswork; slides over glaring socio-economic realities if they don’t fit in with the argument; and substitutes rash assertiveness for reasoned uncertainty about the drift of social relations and political consciousness in a world messy with contradictions. [34]

These remarks do not only apply to Hobsbawm’s original article. A particularly irritating example of the *genre* is Stuart Hall’s claim that ‘one major but neglected factor in the crisis of renewal which faces the left today is the difficulty it has in keeping pace with the enormous cultural changes which have occurred since the 1950s.’ (January ’84, p. 18) The changes he lists have to do crucially with the emergence of a ‘high-wage, high-spend, market-oriented consumer society’ (January ’84, p. 19). They are real enough, but not especially new: Richard Hoggart discussed their consequences for working-class culture back in the 1950s. They date from the inter-war period, and the penetration of monopoly capital into working-class consumption. [35] Their implications for socialists, and in



particular the effect of the mass 'culture industries' in fragmenting working-class experience were already under serious discussion in the Frankfurt School during the 1930s (the famous Adorno-Benjamin debate). [36]

Precisely what socialist cultural politics involves, and what are its limits, are by no means simple questions to answer, as the experience of the most successful example to date in this country, the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism in the late 1970s, suggests. They certainly deserve serious discussion, not Hall's facile journalistic generalisations. One would expect better of the ex-head of a centre for contemporary cultural studies.

Hobsbawm's *Forward March of Labour Halted* holds as little water. Let us recall that the article describes a process of long-term stagnation and decline beginning after the Second World War, an analysis first applied to Britain but later extended to Western Europe generally. The thesis does not stand up to serious examination, as Goran Therborn has shown in a careful comparative survey. He summarises his conclusions thus:

the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s was a period of *major working-class advance* in the history of developed capitalism. The rate of unionization rose: working-class power at the point of production grew, expressed in terms of collective agreements, industrial legislation, the outcome of major industrial conflicts and the distribution of the pie of production between labour and capital. Another major development also took place in this period which, though inherently ambiguous in the totality of its implications, clearly restricted the immediate power of capital over people's lives: the great expansion of the welfare state. [37]

These assertions need to be qualified in two respects. First, the period of advance ran to a halt in the second half of the 1970s, as is shown by the figures Therborn himself gives for rates of unionisation and strikes. The 'downturn' of the past ten years is a generalised phenomenon, not a feature unique to British capitalism. This does not lend support to Hobsbawm, who dates

the decline from the r early 1950s. Therborn's refutation of this thesis is all the more powerful for being made from a left reformist standpoint.

Secondly, Western social democracy notched up a number of major electoral successes in recent years – particularly France and Greece 1981, Spain 1982, Australia 1983. Therborn notes:

Electorally, however, recent British history charts a series of Labour defeats. What is to be explained here, then, is that Britain is exceptional. When almost all the other labour parties of the advanced capitalist world started to grow again, Labour in Britain declined. [38]

British 'exceptionalism' isn't that hard to explain. The picture certainly isn't one of steady advance before 1951, followed by continuous decline thereafter. Richard Hyman points out that

Labour got less votes in 1935 than in 1929, despite the experience of mass unemployment. The intense working-class allegiance registered in 1945–51 was itself historically exceptional and reflected specific influences. [39]

Labour lost office in 1951 despite winning a larger share of the vote than the Tories, because of the vagaries of Britain's electoral system. The Tory governments which followed were able to reap the benefits of the long boom. The 1950s also saw a 'shift in the locus of reformism': full employment allowed workers to improve their material position through 'do-it-yourself reformism' based on strong shop steward organisation. [40] Labour's roots in working-class communities consequently withered – a process encouraged by other developments such as changes in housing and the consumerism emphasised by Hall.

The advent of the Wilson government in the mid-1960s marked a reversal of Labour's electoral decline. The party's share of the vote in the 1966 general election was its largest ever. Labour was in office for eleven of the fifteen years after 1964. However this period – the Wilson-Callaghan era – marked the point at which British capitalism entered an increasingly serious crisis both because of its decline relative to the other Western

industrial countries and because of the onset of world slump in 1968–73. If one wants an explanation of why the Labour vote sank from 48.9 per cent in 1966 to 28.3 per cent in 1983 one must look above all at the way in which the Wilson and Callaghan governments sought to shift the burden of this double crisis onto the backs of its working-class supporters through wage controls, mass unemployment, and cuts in public expenditure. Labourism caused Labour's decline.

This isn't the whole of the explanation: why did Labour's vote sink from 36.9 per cent of the total to 28.3 per cent four years later despite the devastation wreaked by Thatcherism? The answer lies in the deep-seated crisis of organisation, ideology and leadership which set in after 1974 and prevented any major industrial resistance to the Tories until the miners' strike. The result was large-scale demoralisation, cushioned by the fact that the real wages of those still with jobs rose by 5.5 per cent between 1981 and 1984.

This brings us to the question of the struggles of the early 1970s. For Hobsbawm these were largely a 'syndicalist' outburst, deeply flawed by their sectionalism and economism. What this leaves out of account is the way in which the Heath government's attempt to use the state apparatus against the strong workplace organisation built up during the boom provoked the most generalised struggles for half a century. This can be seen in a variety of aspects – for one the class-wide solidarity displayed in the two great struggles of 1972 – the miners' strike and the freeing of the Pentonville dockers, for another the use of tactics such as the flying picket and the factory occupation which involved a break with sectional trade unionism and 'normal' collective bargaining. The early 1970s also saw a great leap forward in the reach of militant trade unionism, which spread from traditionally well-organised manual groups such as miners, dockers and engineers to 'backward' sections – teachers, civil servants, hospital

ancillaries. The struggles of 1970–74 struck sectionalism a series of hammer-blows.

This is not to say that there were no limits to the generalisation of those years. The Tory offensive forced militants to think in broader political terms. However, the prevalence of Labourism among them and the absence of any plausible revolutionary alternative meant that the bottom line of industrial militancy was the election of a Labour government. When this happened, and the attacks continued now under the aegis of the Social Contract, the same militants were politically disarmed. In this sense the seeds of the downturn were present in the upturn of 1970–74, in the politics with which the struggles of the latter were waged. Once again Labourism is at the heart of the defeats of the past decade.

The rhythms of class struggle and their electoral manifestations are therefore far more complex than is suggested by the simplicities of *The Forward March of Labour Halted*. The same is true of Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism.

Let me say first that there is nothing wrong with the term 'Thatcherism' itself, contrary to the claims of some opponents of the new revisionism, for example, Tony Benn, who says that 'all this talk of Thatcher and Thatcherism is a diversion' (January '85, p. 13), or Tariq Ali, who dismissed Thatcherism at the SWP's *Marxism for Students* (February 1985) as 'class-war Toryism'.

Tariq's description is, of course, correct, but it is still necessary to recognise that the same class interests can be defended by a variety of different political forces. These forces can have varying consequences for the class struggle, and it is therefore essential to distinguish between them and study them with great care: think of Marx's minute analysis of different bourgeois factions during the 1848 revolutions and their aftermath, or Gramsci's painstaking examination of different ruling-class currents in the Italy of his time.

From this perspective, Thatcherism does represent what Hall calls a ‘new political formation’, characterised by the way in which it ‘draws on the old lexicon of organic, patriotic Toryism’ but ‘combines this with a virulent brand of neo-liberal economics and an aggressive religion of the market.’ (January ’85, p. 16) This current cannot be reduced to the person of Thatcher herself: it originated in Enoch Powell’s populist break with the Tory establishment in the late 1960s, but gathered force in the early 1970s, as opposition grew within the party to Edward Heath’s ‘U-turn’, his return to Keynesian policies in 1971–2. The inflationary boom of 1972–3 and Heath’s defeat by the miners gave the new right the opportunity to seize the party leadership with Thatcher as their standard bearer. The eventual collapse of the Social Contract in 1978–9 made big capital more willing to give the Thatcherite strategy a chance.

The impact which Thatcherism has had on the bourgeois political arena cannot be underestimated. To quote **Financial Times** columnist Malcolm Rutherford:

It was Mr Roy Jenkins, the leader and founder of the Social Democratic Party, who first introduced the phrase ‘breaking the mould’ into British politics. Mrs Thatcher said at the time, though more privately than publicly, that it was she who was the real mould breaker. [\[41\]](#)

Self-serving though this judgement may be, it is broadly correct. The Thatcherites have succeeded in marginalising the old ‘One Nation’ tendency which had predominated within the party since Winston Churchill displaced Neville Chamberlain in May 1940; they also contributed materially to the crisis in the Labour Party which led to the most serious split in the party’s history; their effect on the terms of political debate can be seen in David Owen’s attempt to construct an alternative ‘Thatcherism with a human face’. Thatcherism, in the form of Norman Tebbit and others, is likely to survive Thatcher’s own removal from the scene.

It is important to recognise all this for two reasons. The first, and more important is that the political successes of Thatcherism have permitted the most sustained and effective offensive against the working class since the 1920s. ‘Know thine enemy’ is an especially wise adage when the enemy is as dangerous as this one. Secondly, it allows us to identify what is wrong with the **Marxism Today** analysis. It is not the concept of Thatcherism itself which is defective, but the significance which Hall and others attach to this phenomenon and the political conclusions they derive from it.

Hall, as we have seen, describes Thatcherism as ‘a move towards “authoritarian populism” – an exceptional form of the capitalist state’. Now the concept ‘form of state’ is best reserved for distinguishing between different modes of bourgeois class domination. In other words, when analysing a particular form of state we are concerned with, not simply a particular set of state institutions and the political forces which struggle for control of them, but the particular manner which these institutional arrangements permit capital to exercise its domination. No ruling class rules purely through coercion, but seeks various means to secure the acquiescence, albeit often only grudging of the masses. The point in distinguishing between forms of state is to identify the different combinations of force and consent through which the bourgeoisie rule. [\[42\]](#)

Trotsky’s analysis of bourgeois democracy is in this respect exemplary. [\[43\]](#) He is concerned less with the representative institutions of bourgeois democracy than with their *social content*. Specifically, these institutions provide a framework within which working-class organisation can legitimately operate. The precondition for this arrangement is the existence of a social layer capable of acting as intermediaries between labour and capital: this role is fulfilled by the trade union bureaucracy, based on workers’ organisation but constantly seeking to reconcile the two classes’ antagonistic interests. It was because bourgeois democracy permits the existence of

working-class organisation that Trotsky argued the proletariat could not remain neutral when this state-form was challenged by fascism. Equally, however, because parliamentary democracy is still a form of capitalist class domination, Trotsky also insisted that the working class could not confine itself to its defence but must go on to smash the capitalist state and replace it with their own form of democracy.

This analysis of bourgeois democracy as a form of capitalist class rule accords central importance to the trade union bureaucracy. Any break with this state-form would involve the destruction of the trade union bureaucracy, as it did very visibly in the case of the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 or the Chilean coup forty years later. A shift to an ‘exceptional state’ would imply a reliance instead on a far higher degree of coercion, whether through a paramilitary mass movement (fascism) or the repressive state apparatus (military dictatorship).

Now there is scope for considerable variation within a particular state-form. It is easy to exaggerate the radicalism of Thatcher’s break with the past because her governments followed a period of very high-profile class collaboration during the Social Contract years of 1974–9. The dependence of the Labour government on the TUC General Council led some commentators quite erroneously to talk of ‘corporatism’ supplanting parliamentary rule. [\[44\]](#) But bourgeois democracy is compatible with a much more subaltern role for the trade union bureaucracy – for example, Britain after the General Strike, the United States for much of the post-war period, and the French Fifth Republic until 1981.

These considerations make it clear that Thatcherism does not represent an ‘exceptional form of state’. The trade union bureaucracy have been absolutely central to containing working-class opposition to the Tories. This was evident before the miners’ strike, but the latter event has removed any doubts that might have existed on the matter. I shall not give details, since

Mike Simons and I provide all the necessary evidence in our book **The Great Strike**.

Thatcher's project is not to destroy workers' organisation, but to create an Americanised trade union movement, in which the bureaucracy exchange a more subordinate political role for greater power to police their members.

The Eurocommunists thus confuse the emergence of a new capitalist political current with a change in the form of bourgeois domination. They are led to this because of a pre-occupation with ideological factors. Hall's analysis of 'authoritarian populism' began with a study of the way in which the issue of mugging was more or less invented in the early 1970s as a way of creating popular support for a 'law and order society' involving far greater coercion. [45] What began as a valuable examination of certain political and ideological trends has since been hypostatised into a mistaken claim that the basic form of class rule is being transformed.

Before inquiring into the reasons for what has rightly been described as Hall's 'ideologism' [46] let us first note its effects. These are summed up by Malcolm Rutherford, writing in **Marxism Today**: 'What you have done, and at times brilliantly, is to construct a bogey that does not exist. The bogey is, of course, called Thatcher-ism.' (July '83 p. 43) The same point is made by another **Financial Times** journalist, Peter Riddell: 'These Marxist commentators have conferred on Thatcherism a greater coherence and consistency than it has had in practice.' [47]

Rutherford elaborates the point:

Andrew Gamble has a very good phrase when he says that the last two periods of Labour government were 'most notable for defensive management of short-term crises.' It is puzzling he does not apply that to Mrs Thatcher, for it is no less accurate a description ... [**Marxism Today** has] been bedazzled by the rhetoric into believing that much more fundamental changes are taking place than is in fact the case. If you looked at the economic



indicators alone, and ignored the rhetoric, you would conclude that Britain's relative economic decline had continued under Mrs Thatcher much as before, despite being cushioned by the revenues from North Sea oil. (July '83, p. 4)

Rutherford rightly adds that 'it seems to be a sound rule ... never to overlook the element of chance.' Thatcher was able to exercise a remarkable ascendancy in British politics thanks, to a large extent, to accident and good fortune. Simon Jenkins of **The Economist** argued at the time of the last general election that 'it is probable that pressure from within and outside the government would by late summer [1982] have driven Mrs Thatcher into a major reflationary package or into resignation' had not Argentina seized the Falkland islands. [48] Even then Thatcher was remarkably lucky: her victory was as much a result of the inefficiency of Argentine armourers in fusing their bombs as it was a triumph of British arms.

More generally, new revisionist analysts show little sense of the contradictions involved in running any advanced capitalist state, contradictions which have dogged Thatcher's government. She has presided over an uncontrollable rise in public expenditure, which has embroiled cabinet ministers in an endless process of bargaining between the Treasury and spending departments. The Tory assault on local councils is more than anything else a consequence of their inability to control public spending; it has led, contrary to the Prime Minister's *laissez faire* ideology, to a considerable centralisation of state power. None of this is at all novel: the same trends have been present in every British government since the early 1960s, although they are now more acute because of the depth of the economic crisis, since higher unemployment necessarily leads to higher social security spending. These contradictions, not any ideological project, underlie the current review of the welfare state. The bitter intra-party disputes the review has provoked are symptomatic of the scale of the Tories' difficulties.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that, even at the ideological level so stressed by **Marxism Today** Thatcherism has not had things all its way. Ex-**New Socialist** editor James Curran wrote recently:

Hall's contention that Thatcherism has undermined 'the popular case for welfare socialism' and 'displaced reformist politics' is ... contradicted by extensive survey data. A recent survey report (**British Social Attitudes: the 1984 Report**, edited by Roger Jowell and Colin Airey) reveals, for example, that the overwhelming majority of people oppose reduced spending on health and education (85 per cent), oppose development of a two-tier health service (64 per cent) and favour a *dirigiste* reformist economic policy – government job creating, construction projects (89 per cent), import controls (72 per cent), price controls (70 per cent) and a government whose first priority is combating unemployment rather than inflation (69 per cent). The same survey reveals, among other things, that Thatcherite talk of incentives has not diminished the view of the great majority (72 per cent) that the gap between high and low incomes is too great. Even those who think that benefits are too high and discourage people from looking for work (35 per cent) are outnumbered by those who think that benefits are too low and cause hardship (46 per cent). (February '85, p. 40)

Opinion surveys such as that cited by Curran, and others which detected a significant rightward shift in popular attitudes during the 1970s [49], are essentially static photographs of a complex, contradictory, and evolving set of beliefs. These beliefs can be explained only when they are set in the wider context of class struggle. This Hall signally fails to do, instead tending to view Thatcherism as an autonomous phenomenon, what has been correctly described as a 'monstrous monolith'. [50]

The inadequacies of this approach are to some degree masked by numerous polemics against what Hall calls Marxist 'automatism', in which 'the "sharpening of contradictions", comrades, together with the rising tempo of the class struggle, will eventually guarantee the victory of progressive forces

everywhere.’ But, Hall insists, ‘ideological factors have effects on and for the social formation as a whole – including effects on the economic crisis itself and how it is likely to be resolved, politically.’ [51]

Now Hall hasn’t invented the sort of vulgar Marxism in which ‘working-class consciousness is as automatic as self-programming underground trains.’ [52] **Militant** is often guilty of this sort of thinking. Thus Rob Sewell, after predicting a new, and even deeper world slump, writes: ‘The crisis – far from cowering the working class – will this time undermine completely any illusions of lasting capitalist recovery and compel the working class onto the offensive.’ [53]

Vulgaries of this sort have nothing to do with Trotsky, who told the Third Congress of the Comintern: ‘Faith in automatic evolution is the most important and most characteristic trait of opportunism.’ [54] Hall’s insistence on the importance of the ‘neglected political and ideological dimensions’ of the crisis is perfectly correct, but his failure to relate them to their anchorage in the forces and relations of production and the class struggle leads to a view of Thatcherism as an autonomous phenomenon operating independently of class forces. Thus Hall offers no account of the sections of capital backing Thatcher’s strategy. [55]

In this he departs radically from his supposed theoretical inspiration, namely Gramsci, who took great care to trace the relationship between class forces and politico-ideological currents. Indeed, Gramsci’s discussion of ‘organic crises’, on which Hall draws, contains a warning against precisely the sort of error made by the theorists of ‘authoritarian populism’. Gramsci writes:

in studying a structure it is necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed ‘conjunctural’ (and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental). Conjunctural phenomena too depend on organic movements to be sure, but they do not have any very far

reaching historical significance; they give rise to political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject political leaders and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities. Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio-historical criticism, whose subject is wider social groupings – beyond the public figures and beyond the top leaders. [56]

Gramsci here distinguishes, in the Aesopian language forced on him by prison censorship, between the ‘organic’ as the economic terrain in which classes (‘wider social groupings’) acquire their basic identity and interests, and the ‘conjunctural’ as the field where political and ideological forces such as Thatcherism fight out the underlying conflicts generated within the relations of production. He continues:

A common error in historico-political analysis [i.e. Marxism] consists in an ability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to presenting causes as immediately effective which only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones. In the first case there is an excess of ‘economism’, or doctrinaire pedantry; in the second, an excess of ‘ideologism’. In the first case there is an overestimation of mechanical causes, in the second an exaggeration of the voluntarist and individual element. [57]

Gramsci might almost have had Hall in mind here. The latter shuns the ‘doctrinaire pedantry’ of the **Militant** only to collapse into an ‘ideologism’ which focuses on ‘immediate causes’ – ‘top political leaders and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities’ such as Margaret Thatcher. His ideologism does not only flaw fatally Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism. It runs through the entire Eurocommunist strategy for combatting the Tory menace. To this let us now turn.

## **From Popular Front to Broad Democratic Alliance**

At the core of this strategy is the notion of a broad democratic alliance (BDA) against Thatcherism. This concept turns out to be quite ambiguous, and is given different meanings by various of the new revisionists. The essential thrust, as we shall see, is to detach socialist politics from working-class struggle.

The origins of the BDA lie in the Popular Front strategy advanced by the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in August 1935. The essence of the strategy was spelt out by the general secretary of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov:

In mobilizing the mass of working people for the struggle against fascism, the formation of a *wide anti-fascist People's Front on the basis of the proletarian united front* is a particularly important task. The success of the whole struggle of the proletariat is closely bound up with the establishment of a fighting alliance between the proletariat, on the one hand, and the labouring peasantry and the basic mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie, who together form the majority of the population even in industrially developed countries, on the other ...

In forming the anti-fascist People's Front, a correct approach to those organizations and parties whose membership comprises a considerable number of the working peasantry and the mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie is of great importance.

In the capitalist countries the majority of these parties and organizations political as well as economic, are still under the influence of the bourgeoisie and follow it ... Under certain conditions we can and must try to draw these parties and organizations, or certain sections of them to the side of the anti-fascist People's Front, despite their bourgeois leadership. Such, for instance, is today the situation in France with the Radical Party. [58]

The essence of the Popular Front thus lay in the notion of a strategic alliance between bourgeois and workers' parties by the Comintern. Its adoption can only be seen in the context of the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. This was partly a consequence of Stalin's disastrous 'class against class' policy,

which had meant the German Communist Party refusing to engage in united action with the Social Democrats against the fascists. [59] The Nazi threat to the USSR led Stalin to seek an alliance with the ‘democratic’ imperialist powers. The Popular Front strategy provided a political rationalisation for this approach, since it legitimised wooing those sections of the British and French bourgeoisie who were worried about Hitler – for example, the Churchill wing of the Tory party.

The Comintern consequently advocated support by the working class for ‘national defence’ in countries such as Britain and France. This policy, and the conception itself of a multi-class alliance led to a rehabilitation of nationalism. Thus Dimitrov told the Seventh Congress:

We Communists are the *irreconcilable opponents, on principle*, of bourgeois nationalism in all its forms. But we *are not supporters of national nihilism*, and should never act as such. The task of educating the workers and all working people in the spirit of proletarian internationalism is one of the fundamental tasks of any Communist Party. But anyone who thinks that this permits him, or even compels him, to sneer at all the national sentiments of the wide masses of working people is far from being a genuine Bolshevik, and has understood nothing of the teaching of Lenin and Stalin on the national question. [60]

Trotsky called the Seventh Congress the Comintern’s ‘liquidation congress’. The CPs had embraced social patriotism, whose logical consequence, present if not stated, was a reformist approach to the capitalist state. ‘Nothing,’ he concluded, ‘now distinguishes the Communists from the Social Democrats except the traditional phraseology, which is not difficult to unlearn.’ [61] This prognosis was confirmed not merely by the practice of Popular Frontism. The first edition of **The British Road to Socialism**, published in 1951 with Stalin’s approval, explicitly endorsed the basic principle of social democracy, namely that socialism can be achieved through winning a majority in Parliament.

Some new revisionists are simple, unvarnished Popular Frontists. This is most clear in the case of Eric Hobsbawm, whose recent articles have been generously larded with quotations from Dimitrov. He loses no occasion to remind us that he is one of those ‘who got our political education and experience in the Communist Parties during the 1930s and 1940s’, the era of Popular Frontism (April ’85, p. 10). (Part of this education came, incidentally, not in the CP, but in the Cambridge Conversazione Society, or Apostles, a secret elite now notorious for having included Anthony Blunt, but far more important as a nurturing ground for such key bourgeois intellectuals as G.E. Moore, Lytton Strachey, and Maynard Keynes. [62]

The Popular Fronts, which reached their climax in the wartime alliance between the USSR and the Western imperialist states, marked for Hobsbawm labour’s apogee, the turning point after which decline began. Defending them, he writes:

The broad alliance strategy led not only, and almost immediately, to the recovery and growth of the Communist Parties in many countries. During and after the victory over fascism many of them reached the point of their greatest strength and influence. It undoubtedly produced a political radicalisation of the workers and other strata, thus giving British Labour its greatest triumph. And, let us not forget, that in many places it raised the political struggle – for the first and only time in some West European countries – to the level of armed struggle, and produced ten new states setting out to construct socialism. Name any other strategy with comparable results. (April ’85, p. 10)

Hobsbawm is a skilful, if dishonest debater. He assimilates opponents of the new revisionism, for example the **Class Politics** group, to the ultra-left sectarianism of Stalin’s ‘third period’:

The ultimate in ‘class politics’ by label was the so-called ‘class against class’ line of the Communist International in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was class politics all right, only unfortunately the wrong kind, for it led the international communist movement to

disaster at the very time when the International expected that the world slump of 1929, which it had correctly predicted, would put the preparation of socialist revolution on the immediate agenda. It didn't. It brought Hitler. (April '85, p. 9)

This argument could only convince the ignorant. Far and away the most formidable critic of the 'third period' was Trotsky, who systematically demolished the absurd construct of 'social fascism' and campaigned with all his power (alas, too limited to affect events) for a united front of all the workers' parties against fascism. But Trotsky was an equally vehement opponent of the Popular Front strategy.

Defenders of the Popular Front often present this as a form of 'classism' on Trotsky's part, an opposition in principle to alliances between the proletariat and other classes. [63] But this is absurd: Trotsky had led the greatest class alliance in history, that of the Russian workers and peasants, in October 1917. His argument against Popular Fronts was about the conditions under which a genuine alliance of the working class with the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie could be achieved. The nature of the peasantry, in particular their decentralised conditions of production, make it impossible for them to act in the national political arena as an independent force. Consequently the political organisations which base themselves on the peasantry and purport to represent their interests are typically bourgeois parties. The only conditions under which the proletariat could ally itself to such parties would be ones in which workers would have to adopt a 'self-limiting formula', refusing to fight for their own class interests for fear of antagonising their allies. In doing so, they would abandon any opportunity to mobilise the peasants themselves in struggle, since this would threaten the latter's political domination by the bourgeois forces which supposedly 'represented' them. This is exactly what happened during the Chinese revolution of 1925–7, with disastrous consequences for both workers and peasants. [64]



Trotsky made the case very forcefully about the first Popular Front, in France, where it embraced the Socialist, Communist and Radical Parties:

The Communists, extremely proud of their initiative in the cause of collaboration with the bourgeoisie ... picture the People's Front as *an alliance between the proletariat and the middle classes*. What a parody of Marxism! The Radical Party is not at all the party of the petty bourgeoisie. Nor is it a 'bloc between the middle and the petty bourgeoisie', in accordance with the idiotic definition of the Moscow **Pravda**. The middle bourgeoisie exploits the petty bourgeoisie not only economically but also politically, and it itself is the agency of finance capital. To give hierarchical political relations, based on exploitation, the neutral name of a 'bloc' is to make mock of reality. A horseman is not a bloc between a man and a horse. If the party of Herriot-Daladier [the Radical leaders] extends its roots deeply into the petty bourgeoisie, and in part even into the working masses, it does so only to lull and dupe them in the interests of the capitalist order. The Radicals are the democratic party of French imperialism – any other definition is a lie ...

An elementary axiom of Marxist strategy reads that the alliance between the proletariat and the little men of the city and country can be realized only in the irreconcilable struggle between the traditional parliamentary representation of the petty bourgeoisie. In order to attract the peasant to the side of the worker, it is necessary to tear the peasant away from the Radical politician, who subjects the peasant to finance capital. In contradistinction to this, the People's Front, the conspiracy between the labour bureaucracy and the worst political exploiters of the middle classes is capable only of killing the faith of the masses in the revolutionary road and of driving them into the arms of the fascist counter-revolution. [65]

This prognosis was confirmed by events. [66] The Popular Front came to office in France in June 1936. Its first task, even before it had formed a government, was to restrain and ultimately to kill off the wave of mass strikes and factory occupations inspired by the left's electoral victory. When Franco raised an armed revolt

against the Popular Front government in neighbouring Spain, the French Socialist premier, Leon Blum, fell in behind Britain's policy of 'non-intervention', which allowed Hitler and Mussolini to aid the fascists with impunity. Blum was eventually driven from office by right-wing sabotage, having achieved little not forced on the bosses by the strikes of June 1936. The result of his failure was immense popular demoralisation. The outbreak of war in September 1939 saw the Radicals ban their one-time Communist allies. The Chamber of Deputies elected with a Popular Front majority in 1936 voted Petain into power after France's humiliating military collapse in the face of the Nazi *blitzkrieg* of May–June 1940.

What about the Second World War, that Popular Front on a world scale? The May 1985 issue of **Marxism Today** contains much celebration of this great 'anti-fascist' struggle, including a comparison by Basil Davidson between Thatcherism and Neville Chamberlain's pro-appeasement wing of the Tory party (though the same issue also includes the thoughts on 1945 of Lord Hailsham, who is not only Thatcher's Lord Chancellor, but was first elected to Parliament as the Chamberlainite candidate in the famous 1938 Oxford by-election, which was fought almost solely on the question of appeasement!).

As in the case of the 1930s, we must judge the wartime Popular Front by its results. The defeat of Nazi Germany was followed by the partition of Europe between the victorious Allies. In the West, the Communist Parties, at Stalin's behest, assisted the Americans and British in restoring order, at the price of suppressing the aspirations to social revolution created by the Resistance. As for the East, is Hobsbawm serious when he talks of 'autonomous social revolutions' occurring there (March '84, p. 10)? The CPs took power in Eastern Europe in every case except those of Yugoslavia and Albania, thanks to the presence, and often active intervention of Russian occupying forces. The social and economic system created by these 'revolutions' has had to cope with permanent working-class disaffection, and a

succession of uprisings culminating in *Solidarnosc*. If this is a successful strategy, I would hate to see one that failed.

In any case, what application does the notion of class alliance have to a social formation such as Britain where the classical petty bourgeoisie of both town and country is a negligible social force? The **British Road to Socialism** originally got round this by talking of an ‘anti-monopoly alliance’, the idea being that monopoly capital is isolated from, and in conflict with, not only the proletariat, but also the rest of the bourgeoisie with whom the labour movement should accordingly ally.

This argument dates back to the 1930s, when the French CP tried to justify the Popular Front as an alliance with the ‘progressive’ bourgeoisie against the reactionary top 200 families. Trotsky commented:

To pretend that [the Radicals] Herriot-Daladier are capable of proclaiming war against the ‘200 families’ who rule France is to dupe the people shamelessly. The 200 families do not hang suspended in mid air but are the crown of the system of finance capital. To cope with the 200 families it is necessary to overthrow the economic and political regime, in the maintenance of which Herriot and Daladier are just as interested in as [the rightist leaders such as] Flandin and de la Rocque. The issue here is not a struggle of the ‘nation’ against a handful of magnates as **L’Humanité** pictures it, but the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. It is a question of the class struggle, which can only be resolved by revolution. [\[67\]](#)

Trotsky’s basic argument, that monopoly capital is inextricably bound up with the rest of the bourgeoisie, has since been elaborated by many critics of the CPs’ theory of ‘state monopoly capitalism’. [\[68\]](#) The idea of the ‘anti-monopoly alliance’ has meant little in practice in Britain, beyond absurdities such as the praise heaped by the **Morning Star** on Tory grandee Edward du Cann, a big finance capitalist if there ever was one, when he joined the ‘No’ camp in the 1975 EEC referendum.

The 1977 **British Road to Socialism** marked a major retreat from the strategy of allying against monopoly capital. True, it talks of ‘an objective basis for an alliance between the working class and many in these sections of the capitalist class [i.e. small employers], against the common enemy – the big British and multi-national capitalists.’ [69] But the whole emphasis of the programme is on the ‘broad democratic alliance’ between the labour movement and the ‘people’s movements’ (feminism, CND, etc.).

These ‘ambiguities’, as John Foster, one of the main critics of the 1977 revision, rightly described them (March ’85, pp. 43–4), probably reflected differences within the then CP majority. Some, such as the late Jack Woddis, continued to insist on ‘the anti-monopoly character and purpose’ of the BDA: ‘the aim is to form an alliance of all the class and social forces in the country against the monopolies.’ (September ’77, p. 265) This is the line taken now by Foster and the rest of the **Morning Star** faction.

The **Marxism Today** faction, on the other hand, want the ambiguities resolved in a direction which breaks decisively with the notion of an anti-monopoly alliance. Thus Alan Hunt writes:

The 1977 version of the **British Road** was significant precisely because it marked a major shift towards the Gramscian [Eurocommunist] position ... But it is clear on re-reading the **British Road** that ... some of the formulations are reminiscent of the economistic view of alliances that were present in earlier versions. I suggest that one of the main sources of contradictory elements in the programme was that for too long the leadership were not providing leadership but were intent on trying to patch up differences between the two increasingly divergent trends within the party. (April ’85, p. 51)

What, then, is the ‘Gramscian’, non-’economistic’ version of the BDA which Hunt and other new revisionists would like written into the CP programme? For some it does mean, quite explicitly, a break with class politics. The most open, and closely argued

version of this position is that defended by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. [70]

For Laclau and Mouffe Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Dimitrov's arguments for the Popular Front marked a radical break with previous versions of Marxism by abandoning the notion of a polar opposition between labour and capital:

The Gramscian theory of hegemony ... accepts social complexity as the very condition of political struggle and ... sets the basis for a democratic practice of politics, compatible with a plurality of historical subjects. [71]

Unfortunately, the implications of this approach have not been grasped by Marxists, above all because of the influence of 'classism: that is to say, the idea that the working class represents the privileged agent in which the fundamental impulse of social change resides'. [72]

The bankruptcy of 'classism' has become evident in recent years, Laclau and Mouffe argue, with the emergence of the 'new social movements'. Society cannot be understood in terms of a single fundamental relationship of class exploitation, as Marx had thought. Rather, 'there are a variety of possible antagonisms in the social, many of them in opposition to each other.' [73] Society is thus a plurality of overlapping antagonisms which may generate forms of resistance, each of equal significance. The plural nature of society means that 'these new struggles do not necessarily have a progressive character', as is shown by the success of Thatcherite 'authoritarian populism'. [74] 'What allows the forms of resistance to assume the character of collective struggles is the existence of an external discourse' [75], namely that of democracy, which welds together the different 'subjects' into a unified bloc, 'the people'. Therefore,

In the face of the project for the reconstruction of a hierarchic society [i.e. Thatcherism], the alternative of the left should consist of locating itself fully in the field of the democratic revolution and expanding the chains of equivalence between the different struggles against oppression. *The task of the left therefore cannot*

*be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy.* [76]

Laclau and Mouffe offer almost no empirical evidence in support of this view of society as a plurality of conflicting groups. Their argument is conducted almost entirely at a conceptual level, involving much bad philosophy, usually of a post-structuralist sort. [77] The result is rampant idealism, according to which it is ‘only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance’ [78] that progressive struggles become possible. The thought that struggles might themselves *alter* the way in which we talk about and see the world doesn’t occur to Laclau and Mouffe (partly because there is no longer for them a world independent of discourse). And yet, at the end of their fashionable Continental philosophising comes nothing more than the pluralist conception of society beloved of Anglo-Saxon political science.

Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe’s arguments do have the merit of drawing out the implications of the BDA – namely a break with class politics. Thus Bea Campbell attacked **Morning Star** editor Tony Chater for ‘stressing the leading role of the organized working class’ in the BDA. She went on to elaborate her own view of the BDA:

Alliances are political processes which transform the constituent parts in their encounter with each other. They are political dialogues in which the constituent parts become both collective agents for change and also subjects for change. (December ’84, p. 26)

If Campbell wants such an alliance – of separate but equal partners – then she must follow Laclau and Mouffe in abandoning ‘classism’ and adopting a pluralist conception of society. They spell this out, for example, criticising even the Eurocommunists’ (grossly misrepresented) patron saint Gramsci for his insistence that ‘there must always be a *single* unifying

principle in every hegemonic formation, **and** *[that] this can only be a fundamental class.*' [79]

The rest of the **Marxism Today** team are not, however, willing to join Laclau and Mouffe in their avowal of 'post-Marxism'. [80] However, their own versions of the BDA tend to vacillate between conceiving it as based on class antagonisms and collapsing into pluralism. Campbell, for example, talks about 'the men's movement which has hijacked the labour movement' (December '84, p. 26), thus both treating men and women as having antagonistic interests, but leaving open the possibility of working-class women winning back the labour movement.

One way of displacing the contradictions involved in such attempts to have your cake and eat it is to focus upon ideological factors to the exclusion of everything else. Stuart Hall is a good example of this tendency. Not only, as we have seen, is his analysis of Thatcherism redolent of ideologism, but he constantly harps, in his diagnosis of the left's ailing condition, on the need to construct an alternative vision of society to that of the new right.

Hall defends this pre-occupation with ideological questions by invoking Ernesto Laclau's refutation of

the proposition that particular ideas and concepts 'belong' exclusively to one particular class ... Ideas and concepts do not occur, in language or thought, in that single, isolated way with their content and reference irremovably fixed. Language in its widest sense is the vehicle of practical reasoning, calculation and consciousness, because of the ways by which certain meanings and references have been historically secured. But its cogency depends on the 'logics' which connect one proposition to another in a chain of connected meanings; where the social connotations and historical meaning are condensed and reverberate off one another. Moreover, these chains are never permanently secured, either in their internal systems of meanings, or in terms of the social classes and groups to which they 'belong'. [81]

Hall gives the example of ‘democracy’ – a term whose meaning shifts and changes whether it is used by the left or the right. Another is that of ‘nation’, invoked by Laclau, and also by Hobsbawm, who, like a good pupil of Dimitrov, warned against ‘national nihilism’ on the left in the wake of the Falklands war: ‘It is dangerous to leave patriotism exclusively to the right.’ [82]

The line of reasoning on which these conclusions are based is not wholly mistaken. How we take a particular proposition depends in part on the other propositions with which it is combined and the context in which they are uttered. However, it is an ultimately idealist error to think that words have *no* fixed meaning whatsoever. Take the concept of nation, for example, it is certainly true that one can distinguish between ‘left’ and ‘right’ forms of nationalism. Thus Christopher Hill traced the different forms of the belief, shared by successive generations of radicals from the end of the Middle Ages till Victorian times, that the English ruling class were a band of alien conquerors and that therefore true patriotism consisted in opposing them. [83] Nevertheless, the term ‘nation’ preserves in all its usages the same sense, referring to a community bound to a unified state and transcending class antagonisms. Any political strategy which bases itself on this concept can only work against working-class interests, by binding labour to capital. The history of the Popular Fronts, sketched out above, amply proves this.

Ultimately, Hall’s ideologism amounts to a form of propagandism. It is undoubtedly necessary to win wide support for socialist ideas. However, this can only be achieved through active participation in and support for workers’ struggles. [84] Yet Hall tends to counterpose the battle of ideas to the class struggle. So he talks about the need ‘to politicize and *generalize* the miners’ strike, winning converts to this fundamental socialist case in all sectors of society ... To fight it as a narrow, sectional class issue is to lose its class content’ (January ’85, p. 19). Translated out of code, this means: mass picketing will alienate ‘public opinion’. The idea that it was those involved most



actively in the miners' strike itself who were most politicised is quite alien to Hall's politics.

We thus reach full circle. The point of **Marxism Today** is to provide a theoretical rationale for abandoning the methods of class struggle. The concept of the broad democratic alliance which is at the core of the new revisionists' arguments either means a traditional Popular Front, which makes little sense in class terms and in any case led to disaster when it was actually practised on a large scale in the 1930s and 1940s, or it involves the abandonment of Marxism for a pluralist account of society. Either way, the political logic is clear enough: towards the centre and a Kinnock government. Now much of all this is vehemently criticised by the new revisionism's political opponents. The **Class Politics** group in particular come up with plenty of good arguments against the ideas of what they call the 'newer left', insisting, for example, that 'unity can only be won on the basis of working-class politics ... the mirror image of economism and workerism is the idea that such issues as peace, sexism, racism and law and order are not class issues and cannot be fought out as class issues.' [85]

However, cogent though the **Class Politics** current's critique of the new revisionism may be, they remain on the same political terrain as their opponents. Thus they defend the 1977 **British Road to Socialism**:

the concept of the broad democratic alliance, a potentially mass force in which progressive movements are brought into a real dialectical relationship with the working class and its organizations, provides, we believe, the most crucial strategy for left advance in Britain today. [86]

The 'movements' and the 'class' are thus still separate from each other.

More generally, the new revisionists' opponents within the Communist Party still expound the BDA. Thus Mick Costello, one of the leaders of the **Morning Star** faction, wrote at the end of the miners' strike:

The miners' battle also illustrated the breadth of support that can be won for aspects of the [alternative economic strategy] ..., even among professional management [presumably a reference to Coal Board dissidents like Ned Smith and the managers' union, the BACM]. That puts into sharp relief the correctness of the Communist Party's perspective of winning a broad democratic alliance for social change, led by the working class. [87]

None of this is especially surprising. After all, the predominantly Stalinist opponents of **Marxism Today** harp on about the CP's traditions, which are those of Popular Frontism. Hobsbawm is thus able very effectively to skewer the Stalinists during his own appeal to the Popular Fronts of the 1930s and 1940s:

The broad alliance line of those years can certainly be criticized, not least for being excessively skewed to serve the state interests of the USSR, sometimes at the expense of working-class interests in particular countries: for instance, by favouring the maintenance of the Conservative-Labour coalition in Britain after the end of the war in Europe. (April '85, p. 10)

This is a shrewd blow. Some of the 'photo-fit hardliners' (April '85, p. 12) were around in 1945 – for example, Andrew Rothstein and Robin Page-Arnot – and would have defended this extreme form of Popular Frontism at Moscow's behest. Was this any worse, Hobsbawm asks, than the line he is now pursuing, which is aimed primarily at returning a *Labour* government rather than a coalition?

Both the **Marxism Today** and the **Morning Star** factions of the Communist Party come from the same Stalinist political matrix. Both accept the notion of broad alliances between the proletariat and sections of capital (to the extent that the Eurocommunists accept class analysis at all). It is hardly surprising, then, that while the strike was still going on the **Morning Star** took a virtually identical line towards the miners' strike as its opponents. Thus, 'solidarity back on the rails' was the headline with which it greeted the Scottish Triple Alliance's disastrous decision to allow coal into the steel works at Ravenscraig. [88] Nor did the **Morning Star** raise any criticism

of the left wing of the TUC General Council for their failure to implement the September 1984 Congress decision to halt the movement of coal and scab oil. The ‘leading role of the working class’ means, for both wings of the party, alliance with the left, and often not so left, trade union bureaucracy.

Not all critics of the new revisionism are quite so tainted. Sections of the Labour left have resisted both the pressure to ‘re-alignment’ (i.e. capitulation to Kinnock) and the arguments of Hobsbawm and others in support of these moves. For one, there are the hard left groups and journals – **Militant**, **Labour Briefing** and so on. Then there are some Labour MPs, notably Tony Benn, who endorsed the **Class Politics** pamphlet as ‘a serious and important contribution to the debate now going on about the future of socialism’. There are other, more surprising elements. The **New Socialist** has, on the whole, been well to the left of **Marxism Today**, carrying a series of articles highly critical of Hobsbawm’s *Labour’s Lost Millions* [89], and describing the miners’ defeat as ‘Thatcher’s Moscow’. [90] Finally, the **New Left Review** has become more and more vocal in its opposition to the new revisionism, publishing not only Ralph Miliband’s article of that name, but also contributions by supporters of the **Morning Star** (an alliance that is perhaps less surprising when one recalls **NLR**’s view, modelled on Isaac Deutscher, that the USSR, for all its faults, represents the revolutionary forces on a world scale). [91]

The existence of these currents is of importance. They articulate a mood among Labour and trade union activists who, radicalised above all by the miners’ strike, want to resist the move to the right. This is not the place to discuss the rather diverse political views involved. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that many of those involved share a similar conception of socialist strategy to the Euro-communists. Ralph Miliband, for example, argues powerfully for the central role of the working class and against the idea of a broad anti-Thatcher alliance. But in a forum organised by **Marxism Today** to mark the centenary

of Marx's death he was prepared to go along with the new revisionism to the extent of saying:

What Marxists in Western countries are faced with is to find what are the appropriate agencies for the new working classes and new movements. It may be that we need now a new pluralism of agencies, in a coalition with each other, and for advances on different fronts. (March '83, p. 11)

Such equivocation is not unique to Miliband. For example, Doreen Massey and Hilary Wainwright argue that

the existing institutions of labour *are* old fashioned and sectional. But what the miners' strike has shown is that these institutions can be superseded and challenged without abandoning class politics. It has shown that it is not a question of *either* industrial action or the new social movements, nor is it one of just adding the two together ... New institutions can be built through which 'class politics' can be seen as more than simply industrial militancy plus parliamentary representation. [92]

The main example they gave of such institutions before the strike was that of the left Labour councils – hardly a very auspicious example in the light of the wretched collapse of the struggle against rate-capping. [93]

Those who want to defend class politics against the new revisionism have to make up their minds. Either there is the objective basis for a multi-class alliance – which is something that must be argued for, and not just asserted. [94] Or there isn't, and the 'new social movements' are significant as responses to forms of oppression which divide the working class. If the latter is true (as I believe it to be), then the question is one of how to unite the working class. To talk of alliances in this context simply obscures the issues and helps to make Popular Frontism respectable.

## Conclusion

**Marxism Today** has very little to say of any theoretical depth or originality. Much of its content is devoted to what Gramsci called ‘political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject top political leaders and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities.’

One could add that there isn’t much to be learned of an empirical character from the magazine, with rare exceptions such as Doreen Massey’s articles on the social geography of modern Britain. [95] **Marxism Today** is a journal of superior political commentary, which is why it has attracted so much praise from ‘quality’ bourgeois journalists – to the extent that some quite senior **Financial Times** writers regularly contribute to it.

What makes it more than an intelligent version of the **New Statesman** is the political role **Marxism Today** plays within the labour movement today. It both reflects and seeks to accelerate the rightward evolution of a generation of socialist activists who have moved often from the far left, sometimes through the Communist party, into the Labour Party. Eric Hobsbawm and the rest of the regular contributors to **Marxism Today** are the most intelligent and eloquent ideologists of Kinnockism. The blows suffered by the workers’ movement since 1979 mean that their ideas have a real social hold. They matter. The aim of this article has been to discuss the theory of **Marxism Today** as a contribution to the struggle against its influence.

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## Notes

1. R. Miliband, *The New Revisionism in Britain*, **New Left Review** (hereinafter **NLR**) **150** (1985), p. 6.
2. B. Fine *et al.*, **Class Politics: an Answer to its Critics** (London 1984), p. 5.
3. See A. Callinicos and M. Simons, **The Great Strike** (London 1985), pp. 116–19, 211–21, 235–8.

- [4.](#) Miliband, p. 6.
- [5.](#) References in the text are to **Marxism Today**.
- [6.](#) **Socialist Worker**, 15 October 1983.
- [7.](#) See especially T. Cliff, *The Balance of Class Forces in Britain Today*, **IS 2:6** (1979).
- [8.](#) N. Carlin and I. Birchall, *Kinnock's Favourite Marxist: Eric Hobsbawm and the Working Class*, **IS 2:21** (1983).
- [9.](#) E.J. Hobsbawm, *The State of the Left in Western Europe*, **MT**, October 1982.
- [10.](#) S. Hall and M. Jacques (eds.), **The Politics of Thatcherism** (London 1983) (hereinafter **PT**), p. 23.
- [11.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 29–30.
- [12.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 22–3.
- [13.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 16.
- [14.](#) **The British Road to Socialism** (London 1978) (hereinafter **BRS**), p. 17.
- [15.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 18.
- [16.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 29.
- [17.](#) J. Bloomfield, *Crossed Lines*, **MT**, April 1984.
- [18.](#) **BRS**, pp. 36–46.
- [19.](#) **Guardian**, 2 November 1983.
- [20.](#) **BRS**, p. 25.
- [21.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 26.
- [22.](#) E.J. Hobsbawm, **Revolutionaries** (London 1977), p. 105. See also Carlin and Birchall, p. 105.
- [23.](#) M. Linton, *Better Red than Left Alive*, **New Socialist** (hereinafter **NS**) February 1985.
- [24.](#) **BRS**, p. 3.
- [25.](#) **PT**, p. 332.
- [26.](#) S. Hall, *Whistling in the Void*, **NS**, May/June 1983, p. 12.
- [27.](#) S. Hall, *The Crisis of Labourism*, in J. Curran (ed.), **The Future of the Left** (Oxford 1984), p. 30.

- [28.](#) S. Hall, *Face the Future*, NS, September 1984, pp. 37,39.
- [29.](#) Callinicos and Simons, ch. 3.
- [30.](#) T. Ali and K. Livingstone, **Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?** (London 1984).
- [31.](#) P. Seyd, *Bennism without Benn*, NS, May 1985, p. 6.
- [32.](#) **The Economist** (11 May 1985) estimated that Labour would have become the largest single party in Parliament on the basis of its performance in the May county council elections.
- [33.](#) A. Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks** (London 1971), p. 175. See Miliband, p. 26, for a rather similar criticism to the one which follows in the text.
- [34.](#) J. Westergaard, *Class of '84*, NS, January/February 1984.
- [35.](#) See M. Aglietta, **A Theory of Capitalist Regulation** (London 1979) for a stimulating, if unsatisfactory discussion of these trends.
- [36.](#) See T.W. Adorno *et al.*, **Aesthetics and Politics** (London 1977), pp. 100–41.
- [37.](#) G. Therborn, *Britain Left out*, in Curran (*ed.*), p. 128. The detailed evidence supporting these assertions is given in Id., *The Prospects of Labour and the Transformation of Advanced Capitalism*, **NLR 145** (1984). Note, however, that his claim about labour's growing share of national income (*ibid.*, p. 18) are misleading: see C. Harman, **Explaining the Crisis** (London 1984), pp. 123–6.
- [38.](#) Therborn, *Britain Left Out*, p. 129.
- [39.](#) R. Hyman, *Wooing the Working Class*, in Curran (*ed.*), p. 95.
- [40.](#) See T. Cliff and C. Barker, **Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards** (London 1966).
- [41.](#) **Financial Times**, 14 May 1983.
- [42.](#) See the admirable discussion in C. Sparks, **Never Again!** (London 1980).
- [43.](#) L. Trotsky, **The Struggle against Fascism in Germany** (New York 1971).
- [44.](#) Reliance on the concept of corporatism mars an otherwise valuable critique of Hall's work, B. Jessop *et al.*, *Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations and Thatcherism*, **NLR 147** (1984).

- [45.](#) S. Hall *et al.*, **Policing the Crisis** (London 1978).
- [46.](#) A. Callinicos, *The Despair of the Reformist*, **Socialist Review**, June 1983, and Jessop *et al.*, pp. 35–7.
- [47.](#) P. Riddell, **The Thatcher Government** (Oxford 1983), p. 19.
- [48.](#) **The Economist**, 21 May 1983.
- [49.](#) See, for example, B. Svarlik and I. Crewe, **Decade of Dealignment** (Cambridge 1983).
- [50.](#) Jessop *et al.*, pp. 37–8.
- [51.](#) **PT**, pp. 20, 21–22.
- [52.](#) S. Hall, *Whistling in the Void*, p. 12.
- [53.](#) **Militant**, 3 August 1984.
- [54.](#) L. Trotsky, **First Five Years of the Communist International** (2 vols., New York 1972), I, p. 211.
- [55.](#) See Jessop *et al.*, pp. 43–4, and J. Ross, **Thatcher and Friends** (London 1983).
- [56.](#) Gramsci, pp. 177–8.
- [57.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- [58.](#) G. Dimitrov, **Report to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International** (London 1973), pp. 66–7.
- [59.](#) Trotsky, **Struggle**, *passim*.
- [60.](#) Dimitrov, p. 101.
- [61.](#) Trotsky, **Writings (1935–36)** (New York 1970), pp. 84, 93.
- [62.](#) Hobsbawm’s long-suspected membership of the Apostles was finally confirmed by the **Guardian**, 7 May 1985.
- [63.](#) The term ‘classism’ seems to have been coined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, **Hegemony and Socialist Strategy** (London 1985).
- [64.](#) See especially **Leon Trotsky on China** (London 1976).
- [65.](#) **Leon Trotsky on France** (New York 1979), pp. 145–6.
- [66.](#) The best compact study of the record of the Popular Fronts is F. Claudin, **The Communist Movement** (Harmondsworth 1975).
- [67.](#) **Trotsky on France**, pp. 147–8.



- [68.](#) See, for example, B. Jessop, **The Capitalist State** (Oxford 1982), ch. 2.
- [69.](#) **BRS**, p. 20.
- [70.](#) Laclau and Mouffe, **Hegemony**. See also Id., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, **MT**, January 1981.
- [71.](#) Laclau and Mouffe, **Hegemony**, p. 71.
- [72.](#) **Ibid.**, p 178.
- [73.](#) **Ibid.**, p 131.
- [74.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 168–9.
- [75.](#) **Ibid.**, p 159.
- [76.](#) **Ibid.**, p 176.
- [77.](#) See A. Callinicos, **Is There a Future for Marxism?** (London 1982), and *Post-Modernism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Marxism?, Theory, Culture & Society* (forthcoming).
- [78.](#) Laclau and Mouffe, **Hegemony**, p. 154.
- [79.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 69. For a refutation of Eurocommunist versions of Gramsci, see C. Harman, **Gramsci versus Reformism** (London 1983).
- [80.](#) Laclau and Mouffe, **Hegemony**, p. 4.
- [81.](#) S. Hall, *The Problem of Ideology*, in B. Matthews (ed.), **Marx: 100 Years On** (London 1983), pp. 77–8. See E. Laclau, **Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory** (London 1977).
- [82.](#) **PT**, p. 268.
- [83.](#) C. Hill, *The Norman Yoke*, in **Puritanism and Revolution** (London 1968).
- [84.](#) See A. Callinicos, *Abstract Propagandism or Politics*, **IS 2:11** (1980).
- [85.](#) Fine *et al.*, p. 3.
- [86.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 63.
- [87.](#) **Morning Star**, 26 March 1985.
- [88.](#) **Ibid.**, 12 May 1984.
- [89.](#) Curran (ed.)
- [90.](#) **NS**, April 1985, pp. 2–3.

[91](#). See A. Weir and E. Wilson, *The British Women's Movement*, **NLR 148** (1984), and J. Foster, *The Declassing of Language*, **Ibid.**, p. 150 (1985). Fred Halliday expounds a Deutscherite analysis of the current world situation in **The Making of the Second World War** (London 1983); see also A. Callinicos, *Washington No, Moscow Reluctantly*, **Socialist Review**, October 1983, and, on **NLR's** Deutscherism, C. Bambery, **Socialist Worker Review**, January 1985.

[92](#). D. Massey and H. Wainwright, *Beyond the Coalfields*, in H. Beynon (ed.), **Digging Deeper** (London 1985), p. 168.

[93](#). D. Massey, L. Segal and H. Wainwright, *And Now for the Good News*, in Curran (ed.).

[94](#). One possible candidate for the role of 'class ally' might be those in contradictory class locations between labour and capital, but no one on the British left seems to have argued this. See A. Callinicos, *The "New Middle Class" and Socialist Politics*, **IS 2:20** (1983).

[95](#). See D. Massey, *The Shape of Things to Come*, **MP**, April 1983, *The Contours of Victory*, **Ibid.**, July 1983.

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\* We have invited Martin Jacques, editor of **Marxism Today**, to reply to this article in a future issue of **International Socialism**.