

The despair of the reformist

Alex Callinicos reviews a new book edited by Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall about Thatcher's appeal and ways it can be fought.

The Politics of Thatcherism

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For the past four years the exciting place for socialists to be has been inside the Labour Party. This was especially so, of course, in 1979-81, when it seemed for a moment that the Labour left, with Tony Benn at their head, were taking the party citadels by storm. All that seems a very long time ago now.

During that period there were two forces on the left that were rather isolated from the Bennite movement in its headlong rush to defeat. This was partly because they were the only organisations of any significance still outside the Labour Party—the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party.

It was also because both had rather pessimistic analyses of the short-term prospects for the left. This set them apart from such figures as Tariq Ali, who was prepared to forget his years as a revolutionary in his eagerness to get in on the Labour act.

One of the few successes

In our own case, the pessimism—realism might be a better word—flowed from our analysis of the downturn in the class struggle which set in around 1975, the conjoint crisis of leadership, organisation, and ideology which has prevented the British labour movement from dealing with Thatcher as it did with Heath.

With the Communist Party it has been rather different. In the first place, the analysis is associated less with the party as a whole, and more with the right-wing intellectual faction around the journal *Marxism Today*. The hostility with which this group is regarded in some CP quarters came into the open when an article containing some mild criticisms of shop stewards was bitterly and publicly attacked last year by the party's industrial organiser, Mick Costello.

Marxism Today survived the row. One can see why—it is one of the few successes the CP has left. Since the present editor, Martin Jacques, took over from the late James Klugmann in the late 1970s, he has succeeded in turning a rather boring quasi-internal bulletin into a magazine sufficiently popular for WH Smith to be willing to distribute it. At the same time, *Marxism Today* has earned the praises of a number of Fleet Street heavyweights—Peter Jenkins of the *Guardian*, Hugo Young of the *Sunday Times*, Malcolm Rutherford of the *Financial Times*.

Turning to this collection of articles from *Marxism Today* one can see why. The magazine has concentrated its attention on the crisis which the British political system has experienced since 1979—the travails undergone by Labour, the rise (and fall?) of the SDP/Liberal Alliance, and the Thatcher juggernaut. This last phenomenon provides the theme of the present collection, as its title and the familiar, demonic features on the cover indicate.

The articles are of variable quality. This is especially true of those concerned with Tory economic policy. A variety of authors—Bob Rowthorn, Andrew Gamble, Michael Bleaney, Ian Gough, Tony Lane—all expound monetarism, and assess its effects, giving rise to a great deal of repetition and contradiction. This, combined with rather uneven attempts to update the articles, and a great deal of printers' errors, conveys the impression of a collection slapped together in haste to cash in on election fever.

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There is, however, nothing slapdash about the keynote article, Stuart Hall's celebrated *The Great Moving Right Show*. Written with great panache, and first published in the dying days of the Callaghan government, the article puts forward a thesis summed up by a recent anecdote of Malcolm Rutherford's:

'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.' (*Financial Times*, 14 May 1983)

Hall makes precisely the same claim. Expressing the point in terms taken from Gramsci, he 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. It seeks to do so by exploiting the contradictions of social democracy.

Labour governments have used the state apparatus as a means of disciplining the working class. This has enabled Thatcher and the radical Tory right to link the traditional anti-statism of laissez-faire economics with an anti-bureaucratic populism. Thrown in also have been some traditional themes of mainstream Toryism, a stress on the family and the 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.' The effect, Hall argues, is a political and ideological repertoire which permits Thatcher to outflank Labour and appeal directly to many of its working class supporters.

Read now, four and a half years after it first appeared, the analysis seems in many ways highly prescient. As a thousand electoral studies have shown, a sharp swing away from Labour among skilled workers was crucial to the Tory victory in 1979. In office, one of the most remarkable features of Thatcher's premiership has been the way in which, especially in 1979-81, when the Tory wets dominated the cabinet, she has presented herself as in opposition to her own government, championing the little man (or woman) against the collectivist state.

God sent opportunity

The Falklands, of course, gave Thatcher a god sent opportunity to play the great themes of *Nation and Empire*. The Family, the subject of a book by Downing Street adviser Ferdinand Mount, is likely to be much harped on in the second term.

The difficulty with Hall's analysis lies, however, in establishing its precise implications. *The Great Moving Right Show* is, in part, a polemic against an automatic Marxism that sees economic crisis as leading inevitably to political radicalisation. Hall insists that 'ideological factors have effects on and for the social formation as whole—including effects on the economic crisis itself and how it is likely to be resolved, politically.' As it stands, this statement is perfectly true, and wouldn't exactly have stunned Trotsky, for example, with its novelty. But unless what Hall calls 'the neglected political and ideological dimensions' of the crisis are related to their anchorage in production relations and class struggle, the danger is that Thatcherism will be seen as an autonomous phenomenon operating independently of class forces.

We can make the point more sharply by going back to Gramsci's discussion of organic crises in the *Prison Notebooks* on which Hall draws in his analysis of Thatcherism. Gramsci distinguishes between 'organic movements (relatively permanent)', which arise from the relations of production, and 'movements which may be termed 'conjunctural'' (and which may appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental). The conjunctural forms the terrain of ideological and political struggles on which capital and labour struggle, each seeking to impose their own solutions to the underlying organic crisis.



Photomontage: Ian Steel

Never was so much owed by so few to so many

Gramsci warns:

'A common error in historico-political (ie Marxist) analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to present causes as immediately operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or asserting that 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.'

What Hall does in rejecting the 'economism' of vulgar Marxism is to collapse into 'ideologism', detaching Thatcherism from its roots in class relations. This can be seen in two ways. First, there is the question of to what extent the present Tory

government represents a radical break from its Labour and Conservative predecessors. Hall describes Thatcherism as

'a 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 at the same time has been able to construct around itself an active popular consent.'

Now the expression 'exceptional state' was coined by the Greek political theorist Nicos Poulantzas as a general description of those forms of capitalist state such as fascism and military dictatorship. They can emerge in conditions where bourgeois representative democracy is no longer adequate as a form of capitalist class rule. Hall denies that 'authoritarian populism' is identical to classical fascism, but he tacitly admits it to the same political family.

Has Thatcher broken with bourgeois democracy, albeit while preserving the facade of parliamentary government? To answer the question we have to examine the Tories' relationship to the working class. For the social meaning of bourgeois democracy is precisely the containment of the organised proletariat within the framework of capitalism.

It is the political form of class collaboration between big capital and organised labour. As a form of class rule it depends critically on the role of the trade union bureaucracy in cementing the working class to the capitalist state. A shift to an 'exceptional state' would imply a reliance instead on a far higher degree of coercion, whether by means of the repressive state apparatus (military dictatorship) or a mass paramilitary movement (fascism).

Once the issue is posed in these terms, it is clear that Thatcherism does not represent a

qualitative break with the past. In order to contain proletarian opposition, the Tories rely, not on the Special Patrol Group or the British Movement, let alone the Young Conservatives, but on such old worthies as Terry Duffy, Moss Evans and the like. Thatcherism is an extreme right wing variant of bourgeois democracy as it has been practised in Britain for much of this century.

Hall is led into his failure to grasp this by concentrating too closely on 'conjunctural factors'. Thatcher has broken with the high profile class collaboration typical of the post-war years which reached its culmination in the Social Contract years 1974-9. But that pattern is not necessarily the normal or typical form of bourgeois democracy. This form of class rule is quite 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.

Hall is undoubtedly right that social democracy in its predominant post-war form—a dreary mix of Fabianism, Keynesianism and welfarism—is in acute crisis. His mistake lies in inferring from this ideologico-political phenomenon to a fundamental change in the form of class rule.

Away from class politics

Hall's 'ideologism' is equally evident when it comes to the question of how to respond to Thatcherism. His and Jacques' introduction to the collection talks of 'the construction of a new political force, the building of a new network of alliances.' Now, in traditional Marxist vocabulary, the term 'alliance' suggests some sort of arrangement between different classes—for example, that between workers and peasants during the October revolution. Is that what Hall and Jacques are thinking of? If so, which class is the proletariat to ally itself to?

Here again nothing is terribly clear. Hall is on record as dismissing 'idiotic prophecies that class is about to disappear', and noting that 'the class is in process of a deep reconstruction'. (*New Socialist*, May/June 1983). True enough, but on my estimate the 'recomposed' working class constitutes about 75 percent of the economically active population in Britain. Who exactly are they supposed to ally with?

The old petty bourgeoisie isn't much more than 3 percent of the workforce—not much of a catch. Or perhaps the new middle class of upper white collar workers (about 20 percent)? We simply aren't told. Compare this with Gramsci's careful class analysis of potential allies of the proletariat in 'On the Southern Question' and the 'Lyons Theses'. The suspicion is that all this talk of alliances involves a shift away from class politics altogether. One article from *Marxism Today* which argues explicitly for such an approach, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (January 1981), is not included in the present collection.

Laclau and Mouffe assert that classical Marxist talk of global class contradictions is old hat, and that the social structure of modern capitalism is so fragmented that all

socialists can do is construct alliances with highly heterogeneous groups—feminists, black nationalists, ecologists etc. Is this the sort of 'network of alliances' Hall and Jacques advocate? Do they also reject class analysis? As Sir John Junor of the *Sunday Express* would put it, I think we should be told.

The effect of this 'ideologism' is to detach socialist politics from the class struggle. Eric Hobsbawm, discussing the Falklands, argues that when nationalism and 'militant class consciousness...go together in harness, they multiply not only the force of the working class but its capacity to place itself at the head of a broad coalition for social change.' He cites the example of the Second World War: 'our "Churchillian" memories are not just of patriotic glory—but of victory against reaction both abroad and at home: of Labour triumph and the defeat of Churchill.'

I'm inclined to reply, tell that to the Greeks. The Allied victory led to the denial of the hopes for social liberation aroused throughout the Continent by the Resistance, and the imposition of reactionary régimes, where necessary by force (for example on Athens, treated by Churchill as a 'conquered city'). And the same is, of course, true of what happened 'at home' after 1945: even Tony Benn these days acknowledges that the Attlee government made Britain safe for capitalism.

It's surprising that as distinguished a historian as Hobsbawm can forget what a number of the more political younger writers (David Hare and Ian MacEwan, for example) have so eloquently described—the lie at the heart of the 'people's war', the manipulation of popular radicalism to preserve British imperialism.

Hobsbawm can, of course, claim justification from the latest in Marxist theory. Ernesto Laclau, in a book cited approvingly by Hall in *The Great Moving Right Show*, argues that ideological elements such as nationalism and democracy are politically neutral. They can be used for both progressive and reactionary purposes. The trouble with the left he suggests, is that they haven't been willing enough to take on the right on their own ground. This sentiment is shared by Robert Gray in this volume. He argues that 'the left must begin to think more concretely and creatively about national identity and national interests'.

'Ideologism' of this sort leaves tactical political options very open, although the general direction is clear—to the right, away from class politics. Take the case of proportional representation, advocated by the Communist Party. Irrespective of the abstract question of which electoral system is more democratic, it is clear that, as Peter Hain pointed out (in a debate with Dave Cook, *Marxism Today*, February 1983), the effect of PR would be to condemn the Labour Party to permanent opposition status, further weakening the link between the organised working class and the bourgeois political arena.

The *Marxism Today* team are prepared to face this prospect with equanimity, because they have placed their hopes not, as the official CP programme suggests, in the election of a 'Labour government of a new

type', but in a wider 'political realignment' involving, according to Bob Rowthorn, elements of the SDP/Liberal Alliance and even left wing Tories.

Ironically, Hall's analysis of Thatcherism as an 'exceptional form of capitalist state' lends support to such a strategy. For, in practice if not in theoretical formulation, this analysis has the same implications as the cruder view of Thatcherism as 'creeping fascism' now being touted around on the Labour left. To combat this threat to democracy, the argument runs, we need, as Hall and Jacques write, 'the broadest possible set of alliances against Thatcherism, involving, in the initial instance, possibly quite modest objectives.'

The vision of a popular front embracing Gordon MacLennan and Mick McGahey, Bea Campbell and Dale Spender, Rudi Narayan and Darcus Howe, David Owen and David Steel, Ted Heath and Francis Pym, swims up before the eyes for a brief, mad moment.

I say 'ironically' because the collection reprints Hall's splendid, biting attack on the SDP, 'The "Little Caesars" of Social Democracy', in which he argues that 'Social Democracy is gunning for the same space' as Thatcher, that it is another version of her anti-working class populism. If this analysis is correct, what possibly can the labour movement have to gain from an alliance with the SDP, let alone from Ted Heath, the man who put the Pentonville Five in jail and presided over the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry?

Balance of class forces

I conclude that Hall, Jacques and Co are guilty of precisely the error against which Gramsci warned, 'an exaggeration of the voluntarist and individual element'. A useful analysis, within its limits, of the politico-ideological significance of the Tory right is likely, in present circumstances, to contribute to the vastly overinflated image of Thatcher as hero/demon created by the media.

It is easy to forget how much accident and good fortune have contributed to her present ascendancy. Simon Jenkins, political editor of *The Economist*, in a review of her premiership, argued that, without the Falklands war, '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' (21 May 1983). Even with the Falklands, had Argentine armourers been a little more efficient in fusing their bombs, the present 'conjuncture' might now look rather different, with a Foot, Pym, or even Jenkins government.

Once we cut Thatcher down to size, then we see the constraints that operate on her even in victory. These constraints arise from the balance of class forces in Britain, and the condition of world capitalism. Factors which have favoured her in the past four years may work against her in the future.

Tony Lane in his article on *The Tories and the Trade Unions*, written specially for this collection, cites a management consultant who writes:



Hail the conquering heroes?
Above: Welcoming the survivors
from HMS Sheffield at RAF Brize
Norton. Below: Welcoming the
person whose political career they
helped save

'If the balance of power has shifted in management's favour, it is because the economic climate has changed...Pendulums swing both ways. When the economy picks up, the unions will come fighting back to recover what they see as ground lost at the last pay settlement—and how many managements, long starved of orders, will want to lose precious new business because of a strike?

It is developments of this nature which will, sooner or later, undermine Thatcherism. More than ever Marxists need to grasp what Gramsci called the 'dialectical nexus' between organic and conjunctural, economic and ideologico-political movements. *The Politics of Thatcherism*, by its one-sided preoccupation with ideological factors, and its effective dissolution of class into the broader categories of popular alliances, prevents us from doing so.

Its publication is likely merely to feed the despair of those who only a few years ago saw Tony Benn as the bearer of the Holy Grail, and now regard Margaret Thatcher as commandant of the concentration camps whose gates they now see opening before them.

