

WORK AND THE WORKING CLASS

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Ever since Marx first systematised the theory that the proletariat is an agent of social change, there has been a great deal at stake in how the working class is conceptualised. Definitions of the working class always imply notions which allow us to understand social reality, the way that society is being transformed and the factors which determine whether or not the workers will support projects for social change. In their only exchange of letters, Proudhon justifies his reluctance to accept Marx's view of the working class by arguing that "We should not view revolutionary action as a means of achieving social reforms. . . I must tell you in passing that the French working class appears to me to take the same view." If we assume that the working class bears within it an inherent political project, be it conservative, reformist or revolutionary, that project must be embodied in a party claiming to represent the working class.

The modern period is no exception to the rule. The period between the Second World War and the present crisis is frequently described as having been a period of social progress. According to this view, social progress was facilitated by increasing state intervention in economic life, by the routinisation of wage relations and by the regulation of capitalist development. This vision of the recent past also implies a particular vision of the working class.

The post-war period was dominated by a number of different conceptions of work. Initially, American sociologists developed the theory of the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class, whilst Serge Mallet developed his theory of the 'new working class' by stressing the fact that the workers had both technical skills and managerial aspirations.² Other writers concentrated upon the working conditions of unskilled workers and upon the effects of assembly-line work, and therefore developed a critique of Taylorist methods of work organisation.³ The one thing that all these theories have in common is that they define the working class in terms of the tasks it has to perform. Mindless and exhausting work leads to apathy and resignation on the part of the workers. As a result, the working class is incapable of defining a radical project for the transformation of society. Such conceptions are then used to justify both the reformist aspirations which the labour organisations attribute to the

workers and the legitimacy of those who negotiate on their behalf.

The current tendency to describe the period of post-war expansion as a specific form of regulation bound up with a social-democratic compromise also implies a specific vision of the working class. This vision itself is in part a product of social-democracy and it legitimises social democracy. It lends support to the tendency to explain the post-war mode of expansion in terms of regulation of wage relations. I will attempt here to explain the connection between a specific moment in the development of social-democracy (very schematically, the period between 1945 and 1975⁴) and the conception of the working class that went with it and which is, in many respects, still the dominant conception. I am not of course referring to the social-democratic theories and practices associated with Kautsky and Bernstein but to a more recent practice which accompanies the development of social-democracy and, more specifically, to the way in which the French 'regulationist' school interprets it.

Regulation Through Wage Relations

Does social-democracy imply a specific conception of the working class? In order to answer this question, we must first examine in detail the 'regulationist' interpretation of the regime of economic expansion which prevailed in Western Europe between the end of the Second World War and the mid-seventies and of the exhaustion of that mode of development's potential as its basis was destroyed. A number of economists⁵ describe the post-war period of economic growth as 'Fordist' in that it was characterised by an intensive accumulation which allowed both mass production and mass consumption to rise. Their analysis is extremely interesting and it is pertinent to our argument in two senses. It represents an interpretation of the factors which produced both a period of expansion and the ensuing crisis, but it also implies that the working class is the key element in the Keynesian compromise.

According to this analysis, Taylorist work organisation was introduced between the wars. It required both mass production and rising sales, but it was introduced at a time when there was only a modest growth of consumption. The divorce between increased productive capacity and restricted consumption then led to the crisis of the thirties. In the post-war period, 'Fordism' was introduced in order to reduce the imbalance between intensive production and the absence of mass consumption. The coherent mechanism established after World War Two was based upon a combination of mass consumption and a rationalised use of labour-power in the factory (Taylorism).

Productivity gains led to an increase in the purchasing power of wage-earners, who thus became consumers. They also financed a generalised social security system which ensured regular consumption. The new 'Fordist' wage relations, which represented a specific mode of inserting

wage-earners into society, were backed up by a whole system of consultation and negotiation which presupposed the existence of trade unions and employers' organisations working within the political framework of parliamentary **democracy**.⁶

Intensive accumulation was based upon both a rise in productivity and an increase in the volume of fixed capital. According to the 'regulationists', it was also based upon the incorporation of skills into the automated machine-system introduced both by Taylorist work organisation and by Henry Ford's use of the assembly line to speed up work. As a result, the labour process was constantly revolutionised during this period. Mass consumption guaranteed a market for the increasing number of commodities produced. The models of production were, then, closely bound up with the models of consumption.

Roger Boyer, for instance writes: 'The exceptional level of growth achieved in the fifties and sixties was due to the compromises reached by management and unions in the post-1945 period. Management was given a free hand to organise work and to take decisions concerning production, whilst the unions ensured that the subsequent rise in productivity was translated into an improved standard of living for **wage-earners**.'⁷ For the productivist model which allowed this compromise, the application of science and technology was an imperative which transcended the class struggle.

This form of compromise, which some authors describe as '**social-democratic**' because it is based upon structured and representative social organisations, implies the institutionalisation of collective bargaining and encourages social-democratic parties to participate in government. It is based upon a conception of the working class which is rarely made explicit but which legitimises its unions, parties, mutual benefit societies and co-operatives.

The 'Fordist' model makes three major assumptions about the working class. Because they have been deskilled by technological progress, the workers are to a certain extent passive; as a result, they have lost their identity as skilled workers, and their class consciousness has declined; at the same time, the working class has become more homogeneous and is therefore more willing to be represented by trade union officials and to accept forms of social and political democracy based upon delegation. Let us look at these assumptions in more detail.

Industrialisation and technological progress mean that dead labour (machines) becomes more important than living labour (workers). As a result, the worker is subordinated to the machines which dispossess him of his know-how and skills. Deskilled, devalued and dominated, he can no longer see any alternative to the capitalist organisation of labour and society. He therefore has no real identity as a skilled worker and his class consciousness declines. Even if workers do find ways to resist deskilling

and do put forward economic demands, all their collective activities are characterised by a certain passivity. Machines and work organisation encourage or even produce this passivity by homogenising the labour-force. As early as 1870, a French industrialist and inventor could say that 'machines are civilisation's most powerful auxiliaries. . . You require intelligence and skill in a worker, and all men possess those qualities in varying degrees; look for machines which require so little intelligence and skill that anyone can operate them. If you do so, the worker who operates them will make a good living, realize that he can easily be replaced and will want to retain his lucrative position. If, on the other hand, he knows that you cannot do without him because he knows his trade—and this applies in many cases—he will ask of you what he likes and you will have to be grateful if he deigns to work for you.'⁸ Here we have the two pre-conditions for a coherent social-democratic vision: workers are interchangeable and they are sufficiently well paid to guarantee them a high regular purchasing power. The working class is represented as being relatively homogeneous and passive but as having enough room to negotiate for its representatives to be able to unite it in unions, parties, mutual benefit societies and cooperatives.

We have, then, the basis for a representation of the working class as having been dispossessed of its skills, as having no real ability to put forward proposals of its own and as being regimented by the social security system and by unions and parties which operate in a framework dominated by the state. The contractual and collective relations into which it enters imply a high degree of subordination. This form of division of labour and of collective contracts means that workers are increasingly interchangeable and that individual workers do not identify with specific tasks.

We can therefore agree with Pierre Rolle when he argues that 'capitalism perpetuates itself, but it does so by becoming socialized in contradictory ways'.⁹ To illustrate his point, Rolle cites the examples of social security contributions, which represent expenditure for all firms and a market for some firms, and domestic labour performed by women: it may well increase the family income, but it also reduces the potential labour force.

Whilst no social class is homogeneous and whilst competition between firms, and even between workers, has not disappeared, social conflicts are also a constant element in the 'Keynesian class compromise'. In a country like Belgium, the institutional framework for a very elaborate form of consultation was established long ago. Even before the Second World War had ended, representatives from the employers' associations, the unions and the administration were preparing for post-war reconstruction by drawing up an agreement for a social contract which defined the broad outlines of the institutionalised consensus implemented by the outline

laws of 1948. By 1945, the government had already drafted an immigration policy designed to weaken the mineworkers' union and to reduce its wage militancy. Social peace implied the weakening of the labour movement." Although there were periodic debates about various forms of worker participation, the question of democracy in the workplace was conspicuous by its absence. It was assumed that the worker could not participate fully because his position in the factory was ambiguous. The democratic compromise typical of political society always comes up against paralysing contradictions in the workplace. Thus, the 'planning' movement led by Henri de Man in the thirties tried to resolve the old 'revolution or reform' dilemma by using structural reforms (nationalising the banks and restricting credit) to implement economic **democracy**.¹¹ In many respects and despite its faults, de Man's view of planning prefigured the links that would later be established between social democracy and the state, but it never had the impact in the economic domain that universal suffrage had at the political level.¹²

The institutionalisation of tripartite labour relations involving the unions, employers' associations and the state can also lead to corporatism and to antagonisms. Although the state plays an increasingly important role in social and economic regulation, the class relations characteristic of capitalist societies do not disappear as a result. At best they are transformed and internationalised to produce a model which integrates a large number of markets and which uses a foreign labour force in the developed countries. The state which once dominated atomised workers gives way to the dominance of mass organisations. At the same time, both production and consumption are socialised to a certain extent. This form of social and state organisation does not, however, solve the problem. It reflects both the effects of working-class pressure and the Western bourgeoisie's fear of the Soviet Union at the end of the war. The labour movement finds that it is able to negotiate over issues relating to living standards, forms of guaranteed security and consumption. 'Even if class conflicts do not disappear, the interests which promote working-class reformism' thus find their institutional **expression**.¹³

Class **Reformism?**

The basic question raised by the development of social democracy is contained within Proudhon's answer to Marx. Christine Buci-Glucksmann and Göran Therborn put it this way: Is it possible to explain 'how and why a working class can be born **reformist**'?¹⁴ If it is true that the working class is by definition reformist, what happens to it when the crisis in Europe dispossesses it of its project either by removing it from power or by allowing it to participate in government and subjecting it to such constraints that it is forced to adopt policies which will result in unemployment and reduced purchasing power and whose effects will be

felt primarily by wage-earners? If that does happen, we might well have to 'bid farewell to the proletariat', as **André Gorz** puts it.¹⁵

The vision of the working class which dominated the period during which social democracy developed centred upon the conflict between workers and employers and upon how the employers succeeded in forcing the workers to accept specific forms of work organisation. Many authors, such as Touraine, Wiewiorka and Dubet, argue that it is because they are conscious of their identity as skilled workers that the workers can challenge the dominance of **their** employers by putting forward a different schema for industrial production. It follows that 'class consciousness is at its highest when the work organisation involved in mass production comes into direct conflict with the autonomy of the skilled worker, particularly in the metal-working **industry**'.¹⁶ The authors' central argument is as follows: 'The labour movement has a centre which can be defined as the point at which work organisation makes its most direct and most violent attack on the autonomy of skilled workers. Taylorism and **Fordism** are simply two of many forms of work organisation. Working-class consciousness is a response to this basic conflict. As we move away from the point at which that conflict is experienced as class struggle, the labour movement becomes weaker and trade unionism ceases to be a social movement'''. Just as working-class consciousness has a centre, it also has a central figure: the metal-worker of **1936**.¹⁸ As that figure disappears, the labour movement naturally becomes weaker and may even disappear too.

Touraine, Wiewiorka and Dubet use this central figure to make a distinction between two types of class consciousness. The skilled worker's 'proud consciousness' means that his actions are determined by his skills and leads to political autonomy. It allows him to 'struggle against the power of his **employer**'.¹⁹ The 'labourer's consciousness' or 'proletarian consciousness', on the other hand, is 'a poor man's consciousness'. It means that his actions are determined by economics and leads to political heteronomy. His demands are concerned primarily with wages and they are discontinuous; they do not pose any overall political or social challenge. 'Unskilled workers are at a disadvantage in that they cannot develop the "proud consciousness" of the worker who has mastered a skill, even if that skill is **threatened**'.²⁰ The unskilled worker, that is, has 'a negative class consciousness which is defined by a feeling of privation and by the absence of any **project**'.²¹ 'It is by being deprived of skills and of any interesting or skilled activity that the unskilled worker is **degraded**'.²²

Working class consciousness is weakened 'when workers are incorporated into a system of organisation and become operatives rather than **workers**'.²³ Mechanisation and rationalisation lead to deskilling. The 'proud consciousness' on which the workers relied to resist their employers is gradually whittled away and destroyed. The history of the labour

process is in fact the history of the transition from a system centred upon skilled work to a technical system centred upon organisation. In a post-industrial or computerised society, the central conflict is that between 'the technocrats who create models of consumption and those who are reduced to being consumers or users, even though they would like to control their own lives'.²⁴ 'As we move away from the site of the conflict between managerial organisation of work and working class autonomy, the labour movement inevitably becomes weaker and more fragmented.'²⁵

According to the authors of *Le Mouvement ouvrier*, working class consciousness is the product of a specific situation exemplified by the figure of the metal-worker of 1936. His situation is further identified with the mastery of certain well-determined skills. The worker is, then, shaped by his trade. His project for transforming society implies the application of his skills in such a way as to free him from the constraints imposed by the organisation which deprives him of the product of his labour.

Only those workers who have professional skills can become autonomous from the factory or resist the power of their employers. It is because they know they possess certain skills that they can put forward demands relating to the running of the factory itself. It is because they possess the requisite skills that they regard workers control as a real possibility. And it is because they wish to develop their skills without being constrained by their employers that they regard workers control as desirable.

The working class is, then, shaped by the worker's consciousness of his class. If work is transformed, the worker is deskilled and the working class becomes fragmented and may even disappear. As we move further away from the central moment of conflict between the workers and both work organisation and machines, the working class becomes weaker. Given the a *priori* identification of the working class with the 'metal-worker of 1936' this is of course inevitable. If the metal-working industries of 1936 disappear, the working class itself will inevitably wither away and disappear.

There is a close connection between this image of the worker and his class and the way in which many authors describe the changing structures of work. Contemporary accounts of work are in fact dominated by a theory which finds a link between technological progress, skills, job structures and the working class. This theory has been systematised by authors like Michel Freyssenet,²⁶ and it tends to dominate contemporary conceptions of the working class. The logic of the system is the logic of capital, which destroys the autonomy of work 'by materialising its order in the shape of machines and by moulding the labour force in accordance with that material order.' 'Automation 'takes away what little intellectual activity was left to the worker and reduces his task to the reflex actions of machine-minding'.²⁸ It is, then, the quality of the labour

performed which determines levels of skills, and machines are instruments for appropriating the workers' knowledge. Technological progress can be described as a process whereby men gradually come to be dominated by the machines which appropriate their knowledge. The future development of work will, then, be characterised by the deskilling of most workers and by the emergence of a highly skilled minority responsible for planning and supervision. It will thus lead to a polarisation of jobs.

Many conceptions of the working class are based upon the widely accepted view that working-class skills are being incorporated into machines and that a polarisation of skills is emerging. Some authors are, however, beginning to challenge this received opinion. Thus, a special issue of *Sociologie du travail* devoted to 'new technologies in industry and the question of skills' refers to 'changes, which are sometimes radical, but usually subtle, ignored or even unacknowledged' in these dominant conceptions. We will now look briefly at some of the contributions to this challenge to the dominant view.

Gilbert de Terssac and Benjamin Coriat base their conclusions on an analysis of 'the modes in which the functions required in concrete labour are realized'.²⁹ They base their work on job descriptions which are for the most part derived from research on ergonomics. They note that working procedures are complex and varied and that they involve elaborate operations and complex mental processes on the part of the workers. They note also that the workers' know-how is not being expropriated by machines and that workers are not being deskilled. The studies they quote to support their argument are not new and are in fact quite well known.

In an analysis of studies of German industry carried out some fifteen years ago, Horst Kern and Michael Schumann previously claimed to detect a dynamic that was dispossessing workers of their skills and leading to a polarisation of job structures,³⁰ but the dynamic they now find in the same factories provides little support for their initial conclusions: the emphasis placed upon 'productive intelligence on the shop floor makes it more likely than ever before that industrial work will cease to be heteronomous'.

In their analysis of studies carried out in Great Britain, Bryn Jones and Stephen Wood³¹ and, from a rather different perspective, Barry Wilkinson³² criticise the deskilling thesis and then challenge Braverman's argument that technological progress results from a movement designed to **deskill** labour and that automation will lead to capital's complete domination of labour. Jones and Wood base their argument on the existence of 'tacit' skills which are not formally recognised by management. Even though new technologies have been introduced into production, it is still essential for the workers to possess certain skills. Thus, 'the irreducible **dimension** of skills based upon tacit knowledge' contradicts the hypothesis that technological changes are powerful instruments for

deskilling. It should, however, be noted that 'workers' know-how', 'informal capacities' and 'tacit skills' are not really enough to overcome the tendency to marginalise labour; they merely restrict its **marginalisation**. Indeed, Terssac and Coriat claim that this analysis complements the deskilling argument rather than refuting it.³³

The challenge to the theory that workers are being deskilled by machines and technological progress is in fact somewhat unconvincing in that it simply reinterprets existing data and presents the revised material as deriving from direct observation. The observation procedures involved in this sudden reassessment of developments in work are themselves based upon a theory of skills.

There is nothing new about this debate, which ultimately concerns different conceptions of the working class. In the sixties, the dominant view was that machines were instruments for expropriating workers, even though it was also hoped that automation would eventually lead to a recomposition of labour. Freyssenet's analysis belongs within this tradition, which is dominated by Georges Friedmann, in that he describes the history of work in terms of stages in the appropriation of workers' skills by machines. Skills are qualitative, and by transferring them to machines capitalism organises the deskilling of the majority of workers.

Pierre Naville, on the other hand, argues that skills are not 'things' which can gain or lose substance. He describes skills as a social appreciation of the value of labour. In the debate with Friedmann he therefore argues that skills cannot be reduced to immediately observable technical working conditions. If they are examined without reference to the educational system and to life styles, working conditions cannot in themselves explain skilling as a process of socialisation. This is why Naville attaches such importance to the view that skills must be measured in terms of the length of time it takes to acquire them: 'that is the only socially meaningful measure of skills. . . society demands variable and differential levels of skill and pays for them **accordingly**'.³⁴

The distinction Naville makes **between** operations carried out by machines and operations carried out by workers leads him to conclude that whereas automatic machine systems simultaneously carry out operations which were formally separate, the same cannot be said of operations carried out by workers. Automation does not mean that the worker performs fewer or more tasks than before; he simply supervises their execution. Supervisory functions may well reflect a transformation of work in that they alienate the worker still further from the product of his labour, but they do not mean that work is being either fragmented or unified. From this point of view, **the question** of whether or not workers are being dispossessed of their skills loses much of its substance.

A Dominant Conception

Why should the idea that the worker is being deskilled by technological progress continue to dominate the sociology of work even though it has been under attack for a long time? Theories which see skill in terms of possession or dispossession of know-how are widespread because workers themselves discuss skill in those terms and because the related theorisations are both comprehensible and suitable for use in negotiations.

Class consciousness itself provides researchers with a further let out. Touraine, Wiewiorka and Dubet's 'sociological intervention' leads them to the conclusion that skilled workers have 'lost their autonomy' and have been deskilled as a result of developments in technology: 'The role of the skilled worker, the central figure in the trade union movement, has been marginalised by changes in methods of production and work organisation. Ladle-men, smelters and crane-operators, many of whom have either undergone a long period of on-the-job training or have served an apprenticeship, constantly express their fears about mechanisation and rationalisation.'³⁵ A worker traces 'the history of how the methods of work organisation which destroyed skilled trades also destroyed the steel-makers' pride and autonomy: "Nowadays, workers are richer but less independent".³⁶ Similarly, 'It is by being deprived of skills and of any interesting or skilled activity that the unskilled worker is degraded.'³⁷ and 'unskilled workers are at a disadvantage in that they cannot develop the "proud" consciousness' of the worker who has mastered a skill, even if that skill is threatened'.³⁸ All workers feel that they have lost their trade or are threatened with losing it,³⁹ and the labour movement remains such a central point of reference that the reader cannot fail to catch the nostalgic tone.

The authors of *Le Mouvement ouvrier* always interpret this nostalgia as a reflection of the disappearance of skilled trades and of the decline of the labour movement. Nostalgia for the days of the artisan is always present. But if we listen carefully to what the workers are saying, there is another possible interpretation. Whilst the artisan was trapped by his tools and by his working conditions and whilst the worker is trapped by being dispossessed of both his tools and the product of his labour, he can try to influence his living and working conditions by forming a coalition with other workers. A coalition of workers presupposes that the act of labour involves relationships which are strong enough to give birth to collective interests. If, on the other hand, we concentrate upon the identity of the skilled worker we tend to lapse into psychological interpretations ('skilled consciousness' and motivation to work) and to promote a nostalgic vision because any change is by definition perceived as leading to a loss of identity. The condition of the working class then has to be described in terms of deskilling, anomie and alienation. Work is assumed to have an atemporal value (know-how, solidarity and 'skilled consciousness') which

is intrinsic to the worker and which is now being destroyed by changes in the technological environment. If we interpret working-class consciousness in terms of working-class trades, we simply describe the requirements of production and turn them into a source of professional pride. 'Proud consciousness' is also the complex psychological mechanism which enables a miner to accept the fact that his lungs are being turned into stone and to go on describing a period when working conditions led to frequent deaths as the age of gold.

The fact that the hypothesis formulated by the authors of *Le Mouvement ouvrier* finds favour with the workers does not mean that it has any real explanatory value. Just as workers speak in mythical terms of the heroic past of their unions and parties, Touraine, Wiewiorka and Dubet mourn the disappearance of the identity of the skilled worker and the coalitions of the past. We then also see the worker as participating in his own alienation; the violence he experiences every day becomes insignificant and is transformed into positive images centring upon skilled consciousness and working class consciousness.

The notion of dispossession dominates the analysis of skills. It derives much of its strength from the discourse of the workers themselves. It gives rise to a theory of skills which encourages the worker to take a nostalgic view of his past conditions of exploitation and which at the same time promotes the notion that the working class is passive, that its aspirations have to be mediated by political or union affiliations and that it is dependent upon various branches of the social security system.

The Active Population and the Extension of the Wage System

The implications of the debate go far beyond differences of opinion as to the value of describing work situations in terms of the relative 'de-skilling' or 'reskilling' of operatives. It is the notion of skill itself that is at stake, or in other words the theoretical conditions which allow us to understand how work valorises different generations of labour. Skill has to be understood in terms of socialisation, and not in terms of the gain or loss of substance, and the transformation of work has to be seen as an effect of the constant destructuring and restructuring of social relations.

No matter which part of the world we look at, changes in the active population show a sharp rise in the number of wage-earners and a considerable fall in the number of non-wage earners. OECD statistics for 1984 show that in the European countries surveyed, wage-earners represented between 70% (Spain) and 95% (Sweden) of the total active population.⁴⁰ The extension of wage-earning has, then, been the major tendency affecting the active population in recent years:

Whilst the fact that more people now work in offices than in factories and that there are considerable differences between the position of a teacher and that of a factory worker can be used to show that the working

class is disappearing, the most striking trend is the increase in wage-earning as opposed to other forms of work. Despite their different status, **non-wage-earners** define themselves in relation to wage-earners and even model their economic demands on those made by wage-earners. In terms of pensions, unemployment benefit, the working week and holidays, and even use of the strike weapon, wage-earners always provide the model.

Although the extension of wage-earning is the dominant trend within the active population, wage-earners do not see themselves as equals or as having the same interests. They make distinctions between themselves and others in terms of their respective status (factory worker, office worker, manager, public sector, private sector, the unemployed. . .) and their position in the hierarchy. The mechanisms whereby skills are acquired are probably the key factor in the differentiation of workers.

Michel Aglietta and Anton Brender argue that the existence of a hierarchy is a component element of the **wage-system**.⁴¹ Struggles over status are of central importance and effectively replace the class struggle. In the 'waged society' they describe, wage-earners have become so dominant, both in quantitative terms and in terms of forms of organisation and legitimation, that there is little room for other social groups. The unions and parties which represent wage-earners quite naturally come to see themselves as representing the general interest which, in waged societies, is synonymous with the national interest. In political terms, their ambition is to ensure that the state administers the solidarity systems of civil society and to develop new forms of consumption. It will then be possible to articulate a wage-system organised by the nation-state with multinational capital.

Taking into account the real differences that exist between **wage-earners**, describing divisions between them as a struggle for status, ensuring that they are controlled by the state and then adopting policies designed to promote equal opportunities and social justice results in a typically social-democratic contradiction. Pierre Rolle summarises the problem very accurately when he remarks that the **wage-system** embodies 'the contradiction which arises when wage-earners pay taxes and insurance contributions which are used to finance the system that creates differences between them and when they are forced to unite to defend the skills and hierarchies which divide them'.

The appearance of unemployment presupposes a division between time spent in paid work and time spent on domestic work and it means that, if they are to meet their needs, workers must sell their labour-power to an employer. In other words, labour becomes a commodity which can be exchanged. In that sense, the appearance of unemployment presupposes the existence of the **wage-system**.⁴²

The fact that most industrialised countries in the West have experienced a considerable rise in unemployment since 1974 confirms that it is a

collective phenomenon. The fact that unemployment is a selective process was recognised long ago.⁴³ It was for a long time assumed that workers with 'poorer skills', the uneducated, workers employed in sectors experiencing difficulties, and women were the most vulnerable. But the rise in **unemployment** tends now to blur such distinctions. In terms of education, it is no longer only those who have no qualifications who are affected. Unemployment is rising and it takes no account of the level of education or of the educational background of those who are seeking work. In fact those who have undergone vocational training in technical schools or institutes are often the most vulnerable. Unemployment is beginning to affect workers collectively; the selective processes simply affect the length of time they remain unemployed and the type of jobs that are available. In other words, finding work is a problem for more and more people: young school-leavers, women who have temporarily interrupted their **professional** activities, workers who have **lost previous** jobs. The whole process is becoming an area in which selectivity operates. The difficulties young people experience in finding work have less to do with inadequate preparation for the world of work while they were at school than with the fact that unemployment is becoming a process whereby certain skills are selected from amongst others. And, as so many studies have shown, that is also a **process** of social selection.

Insertion into social and professional life is not then a rapid or neutral moment which we can ignore in order to concentrate on what happens 'before' (being at school or losing one's job) and 'after' it (finding a job). The transition from unemployment to employment has become an important moment, and not only in terms of the development of the individual. It has become a major aspect of the conditions imposed upon all workers in a waged society. It is not, then, surprising to find that this phase is becoming institutionalised and organised, or to learn that it tends to be determined by changes in the **productive** system.

Although there are of course national variations, the crisis means that the pattern of unemployment in the developed capitalist countries is broadly **similar**.⁴⁴ The key dates are **1974-75** and **1979-80**, when there was a sharp increase in unemployment and when governments had to alter their economic policies as a result of the oil crisis. The rise in unemployment began with the destruction of jobs, a process which affected all the developed countries, regardless of national variations.

After the Second World War, the labour market became institutionalised and the entire Mediterranean basin became a labour pool for Western Europe. But at the same time, the composition of the labour force in Western Europe itself was transformed. The arguments of many authors notwithstanding, the changes did not result in a polarisation of job structured and did not produce a pyramid with deskilled workers at the bottom and highly-skilled workers at the top.

The Challenge to the Division Between the Public and the Private Sector

As the working class asserts itself and as its organisations become vehicles for demands relating to working conditions, purchasing power and employment, the dividing line between the public and private sectors shifts to produce what Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn term 'the material basis for unprecedented demands upon the state'.¹⁴⁵ As a result, relations between the working class and the state are greatly modified. The outcome is the modern form of social-democracy exemplified by the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain and West Germany. This development is inseparable from the accumulation of capital on a large scale, the extension of the wage-system to new sections of the population, the development of mass consumption that results from increased working-class pressure, and from the expansion of the modern welfare state.

The argument that the deskilling and homogenisation of the working class by mechanisation and by the extension of the wage system has produced a mass of deskilled workers who are being both superexploited and internationalised by **Fordism** is closely connected with the view that representation inevitably takes the form of delegation, that bargaining has been institutionalised, that politics have become a mass phenomenon and that the masses can be organised from above. It follows that the labour movement has a corporatist economic basis but that its electoral strategy is designed to win a political majority. According to this view, the interests of the workers have a universal significance which transcends their specific interests: working-class organisations represent the interests of the collectivity as a whole, as opposed to sectional interests, and they become popular, inter-class parties, even if they are predominantly working-class based. They then become parties of government, though there may be national differences in terms of their form and content: socialist, social-democratic or labourist parties, or the Italian **centre-left** model.

The Keynesian state articulates the contradiction between the social nature of production and private ownership of the means of production by playing a central role in the regulation of wage relations and by attempting to implement a 'state socialisation' of production. Collective bargaining and participation in socialist, social-democratic or labourist governments subject working-class demands to increasing state mediation.

At the same time, the role of the state and the public sector is challenged more seriously than ever before. Although all demands are addressed to the state, there are constant complaints about state tyranny, the weight of state bureaucracy and about public servants. The present challenge to the state is far-reaching, and it represents neither a demand for the familiar strategy of socialising losses and privatising profits nor a response to the crisis in public finance. Still less is it simply an ideological phenomenon such as neo-liberalism. The challenge to the role of the state may take the

form of deregulation (the abolition of rules governing the labour market and wages, or protecting certain economic-agents from the effects of competition), decentralisation or privatisation. All these strategies reflect a desire to make various areas of economic and social life more responsive to market forces and competition.

The general tendency to increase profit rates means that the public sector is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, the increasing internationalisation of production undermines the old alliance between state and national industries, which was forged by the demands of a wartime economy and strengthened by the Cold War. On the other hand, what is usually termed the 'tertiary sector' (commerce, finance, education and services) becomes more important.

Table I below summarises changes in the active population in the USA and EEC member countries and shows the increasing importance of the service sector in both. It further shows that the structure of employment in Europe in 1982 is very similar to that prevailing in the USA in 1960. The discrepancy relates both to differences in productivity levels and to differences in wage levels, collective relations and forms of accumulation.⁴⁶ Whilst the service sector as a whole is affected by rationalisation because of its low productivity, the public sector is even more severely affected because of the role it plays and because of the contradiction between its national structure and the multinational nature of production.

TABLE I
Percentage of Active Population Employed by Sector of Economic Activity

	USA			EEC *		
	1960	1974	1982	1960	1974	1982
Agriculture	8.5	4.2	3.6	18.6	9.6	7.6
Industry	35.3	32.4	28.4	41.2	41.2	36.3
Services	56.2	63.4	68.0	40.2	49.2	56.1
	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Ten member countries.

Source: *Statistiques de population active*, Paris, OECD, 1984.

The public sector is the key element in the Keynesian state because of the high number of jobs it provides and because of its relations with the labour movement.

Management in public services departs from the usual commercial rules and has no direct contact with the public. It therefore becomes a target for neo-liberal ideology. The argument is that those public services which are seen to be inefficient must reduce their running costs, diversify

their activities in response to demand and establish new relationships with their customers. In practice, however, the balance of power in a period of crisis and unemployment means that there is a tendency to dismantle certain public services, to pay more attention to big and profitable customers and to alter the very function of public services. Studies of the effects of computerisation show that in terms of occupational health, the management of funds is now regarded as more important than the prevention of illness.⁴⁷

Unstable Employment and Changes in the Working Class

Unemployment is rising. Working conditions are becoming more precarious. Women make up a greater proportion of the active population than ever before. Public services and the status of public employees are coming under attack. Immigrant workers are joining trade unions. Standards of working-class education are rising, but young people find it increasingly difficult to obtain work. But can all these phenomena be regarded as resulting from the inescapable logic of technological progress? Attempts to explain them in such terms reduce socio-economic phenomena to expressions of technological change and make technology seem autonomous from the social system which produces it. Job losses, the relocation of industry and uneven regional development are seen as the 'natural' effects of a new 'technological' fate. These theories are often contradicted by empirical studies which show that, on the contrary, there is a close connection between the technical, organisational and social aspects of the application of new technologies. In her studies of employment prospects in the European chemicals industry, **Marcelle Stroobants** has shown that the new automated plants make it possible to adopt decentralised forms of work organisation which are quite in keeping with the existing division of labour.⁴⁸ They can also lead to a very supple combination of continuity and diversity in production and flexible use of the labour force. Even though these plants promote staff mobility and require workers who can carry out more than one task, they do not break down old divisions within the labour market. Automation means that, in many cases, office staff and middle management can take on the coordinating and supervisory tasks associated with Taylorist methods of work organisation. In the chemicals industry, for instance, the first phase of automation led to changes in work organisation and job structures. Those changes meant that the work force had to have multiple skills and led to the introduction of subcontracting, and it has been said that they are typical of processing industries.⁴⁹ But the same methods of labour-management immediately spread to other industries, regardless of technical considerations. Technological innovation thus seems to be an instrument of economic and management policies whose aims are social rather than technical.

'Modernisation' strategies designed to challenge the system of collective labour relations have to be seen as an effect of the way the system breaks down in periods of crisis. Measures which protect workers against the uncertainties of the market come to be seen as 'established rights' and as 'obstacles' to flexibility, which is defined as meaning that wage relations should be more responsive to market forces. The conditions under which new technologies are mastered and socialised becomes a major consideration in drawing up policies for labour-management and economic re-deployment. In this context, what does it mean to say that jobs should respond to market forces?

It means, first of all, that collective bargaining should, as far as possible, be restricted to individual factories in order to make it responsive to the market and to competition. The workers, who have every reason to want the factory to survive, also find themselves competing. As unemployment rises and as both working conditions and wages deteriorate, the employers are in a position to make greater demands, and as collective bargaining breaks down, rivalry between the workers increases. It is not only 'secondary markets' that are vulnerable and it is not only jobs reserved for women and immigrants that are at risk. The same considerations apply in all areas, including basic industries and public services. Nor is the problem restricted to the workplace. The absence of jobs also has a profound effect on the school system: what is the point of staying on at school if education is useless in getting a job? As a result social, family, emotional and cultural life is seriously destabilised.

Productivity is still the main issue. Marx took the view that the war between capitalists would be won by sacking armies of workers and not by recruiting **them**.⁵⁰ He was right, but not completely right. Reducing the cost of labour is not enough. Wage-earners must also be involved in their work. They must agree to play the game and must further the factory's objectives by giving it not only their time, but also their **know-know**, their skills, their autonomy and their creativity. With automated factories, it is more important than ever before for information and know-how to circulate and to feed into the work of conceptualisation. Different forms of work organisation have been used to mobilise the work force, with varying degrees of success: 'Taylorism, human relations, semi-autonomous teams, autonomous groups. . . Improvements in productivity were paid for with wage increases, improvements in working conditions and by giving the unions more scope for action (better information, recognition of rights, consultation procedures).

The current change in collective labour relations stems from management's refusal to go on granting the traditional concessions over wages, working conditions and new rights. But management does demand loyalty. It demands that the workers accept the logic of the factory and identify with its interests, even when their jobs are at risk. They have to identify

with the factory and its ethics, but in exchange they have to accept fewer concessions, especially over wages. This new ethics implies far-reaching changes in labour relations. It means that conflict inside the factory must give way to harmony and that there can be no solidarity with other workers. Once the trade unions have been confined inside individual factories, work organisation can be used to break them. Autonomous teams, for instance, are made up of volunteers and are designed to bypass union delegates.

How do changes in the labour market relate to the workers' ability to influence the balance of power and to changes in the labour movement? It is here that we can see the relevance of the distinction that Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet make between the labour movement and working-class organisations. On the other hand, their views on the content of the labour movement are somewhat debatable. Given that they define workers as individuals who work with material things and who therefore have a political project, they are forced to conclude that workers are disappearing. They then argue that the labour movement is in decline, but that trade union organisations are not on the retreat.⁵³ They also claim that 'the very decline of the labour movement means that the unions take on a greater political role and become major participants in the formulation of economic and social policies'.⁵³ Finally, they predict that the labour movement will disappear in the near future, that the trade unions' political importance will grow accordingly,⁵³ and that the unions will be able to accommodate themselves to 'new social movements because they know that they alone have the capacity to convince and mobilise people on the same scale as the old labour movement'.⁵⁴

According to Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet, 'the social relations which the labour movement once supported are no longer central to society'.⁵⁴ But can operating machines and working with material things really be described as 'social relations'? Why should the working class be defined as a body of manual workers? Was there ever any clearcut definition of manual labour? Does it include the work performed by saleswomen in a department store, workers in a power station, airline pilots and maintenance staff? Production began to develop at a certain stage, and as it developed manual work on the shopfloor gradually gave way to collective administrative and supervisory work. The analysis should begin with labour relations and not with specific tasks.

In terms of the framework we have outlined, work in our societies can be defined primarily in terms of wage-earning, and it is constantly changing. In periods of crisis, both work and the working class are unstable. As unemployment rises, trade unions have less and less room to negotiate. They may even suffer a major decline in membership, even though wage-earners represent an increasing proportion of the active population. In other words, whilst the social relations which define work in our societies

are expanding, and whilst the social base of the labour movement is growing, its ability to negotiate is declining. My conclusions are very different to those reached by Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet. They claim that the crisis will lead to the disappearance of the labour movement, but that union organisations will survive. I would argue that, on the contrary, the social base of the labour movement is expanding considerably, even though the trade union movement's ability to negotiate is declining considerably.

The very idea of a social democratic compromise, which lies at the origins of the Keynesian state, presupposes the existence of a working class which is at once passive and homogeneous, but which can also use its own organisations—and only those organisations—to make the bourgeoisie agree to a different division of the product of increased productivity.

Earlier conceptions explained the reformism of working class consciousness in terms of the passivity induced by relations of production; the more recent theories attempt to justify the need for flexibility in labour management in terms of the need to introduce market forces into wage relations. They also try to make unemployment acceptable by claiming that there is a connection between the fact that young people are 'allergic to work' and the fact that jobs are precarious. Finally, they justify the alleged conservatism of trade unions which do not share these 'new values'.

In fact, there are no 'new' values as opposed to 'old values'; there is no 'new' working class, as distinct from the 'old'; work is constantly being transformed; and there is therefore no stable system of reference to judge it by. Work can only be understood in terms of the social relations which define it, and in our societies those relations are typified by the **wage**-system. The wage-earner differs from the artisan in that he is separated from both his tools and the product of his labour. Because its situation is by definition unstable, the working class is constantly and simultaneously broken up and recreated. The labour movement can control its destiny by returning to the practices which give it the strength to challenge the tendency to alienate the worker from the product of his labour. Its choice remains between constant pressure against exploitation and domination on the one hand and social democratic institutionalisation into the structures of capitalism on the other.

NOTES

1. Proudhon, letter of 17 May 1846 to Marx. For the full text see Pierre Hautmann, *Proudhon, Marx et la pensée allemande*, Grenoble Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1981.
2. Serge Mallet, *La Nouvelle Classe ouvrière*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1963.
3. Cf. Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopofy Capital*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974; Claude Durand, *La Travail Enchaîné*, Paris, Editions du

Seuil, 1978.

This periodisation is of course approximate in that in Scandinavia (and especially Sweden), this model appeared between the wars. It does however apply to most countries in Western Europe.

5. Michel Aglietta, Robert Boyer, Alain Lipietz and Benjamin Coriat.
6. Cf. Robert Boyer, 'Les Transformations du rapport salarial dans la crise', *L'Emploi, Enjeux économiques et sociaux (Colloque de Dourdan)*, Paris, Maspero, 1982, pp. 50-102. Wage relations are defined as 'all those conditions which regulate the use and reproduction of labour power, including work organisation, hierarchies of skills, the mobility of the labour force, training and use of income from wages'. *ibid.*, p. 80.
Robert Boyer, *L'Introduction du taylorisme en France à la lumière de recherches récentes*, Paris, CEPREMAP, 1983, p. 29. Cf. Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*, London, NLB, 1979; Benjamin Coriat, *L'Atelier et le chronomètre*, Paris Christian Bourgeois, 1979.
7. Denis Polot, (ed.), Alain Cottereau, *Le Sublime, ou le travailleur comme il est en 1870, et ce qu'il peut être*, Paris, Maspero, 1980, p. 406.
9. Pierre Rolle, 'Le Capitalisme perpétuel', *En Jeu*, no. 11, April 1984, p. 22.
10. Cf. Albert Martens, *Les Immigrés, flux et reflux d'une main-d'oeuvre d'appoint*, Brussels, Editions Vie Ouvrière and Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1976.
11. De Man's *planisme* has been described as 'a curious attempt to synthesise the aims of Lenin and those of Roosevelt', Christine Bucu-Glucksman and Göran Therbom, *Le Défi social-démocrate*, Paris, Maspero, 1981.
12. Although factory union branches were recognised after the war in some European countries, in others this is a recent phenomenon. In France, for instance, it took the events of May '68 for them to be recognised. Ever since the nineteenth century, the factory has been dominated by the authority of the employer and by work discipline. The political sphere is distinct from the 'social question' and the world of the factory.
13. Bucu-Glucksman and Therbom, *Le Défi*, p. 120.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
15. André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, (Pluto, 1983).
16. Alain Touraine, Michel Wieviorka and François Dubet, *Le Mouvement ouvrier*, Paris, Fayard, 1984, p. 73.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 321. It should, however, be noted that the authors make a constant distinction between the labour movement and the trade union movement. Thus, 'The decline of the labour movement does not mean that trade union struggles are on the decline. . . or that trade union organisations are on the retreat.' They then add (p. 327), that 'a distinction has to be made between unionism based upon class consciousness and forms of unionism which take their unifying principles from union policy alone.' However, 'the end of the labour movement inevitably leads to a decline in union activity; unionism cannot escape the effect of the social changes which are transforming industrial society into a post-industrial society', p. 386.
Michel Freyssenant, *La Division capitaliste du travail*, Paris, Savelli, 1977.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
29. Gilbert de Terssac and Benjamin Coriat, 'Micro-électronique et travail ouvrier dans les industries de process', *Sociologie du travail*, 4, 1984, pp. 384-397.
30. Horst Kern and Michaël Schumann, 'Vers une professionnalisation du travail industriel', *ibid.*, pp. 398-421.
31. Bryn Jones and Stephen Wood, 'Qualifications tacites, division du travail et nouvelles technologies', *ibid.*, pp. 407-421.
32. Barry Wilkinson, 'Technologie, qualifications et formation: une étude de cas sur les machines à commande numérique', *ibid.*, pp. 447-456.
33. Terssac and Coriat, 'Micro-électronique...'
34. Pierre Naville, 'Éclaircissements et discussions. Réflexions à propos de la division du travail', *Cahiers d'étude de l'automatisme et des sociétés industrielles*, 3, 1962, p. 243.
35. Touraine *et al.*, *Le Mouvement ouvrier*, p. 162.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
40. OECD, *Quarterly Labour Force Statistics*, 4, 1984. The percentage of wage-earners in countries like France, West Germany and the UK is between 85% and 90%.
41. Michel Aglietta and Anton Brender, *Les Métamorphoses de la société salariale*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1984.
42. Unemployment is not to be confused with idleness. A survey I carried out on how ten-year-old children perceived unemployment showed that they had a very high opinion of unemployed women. They thought they were very active and busy with work in the home, whereas they regarded men as idle. This is an interesting inversion of the dominant perception of unemployment.
43. R. Ledrut, *Sociologie du chômage*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1966.
44. Robert Tollet, 'Emploi et chômage: des séquences différenciées dans la crise des économies industrialisées', *Critiques Régionales-Cahiers de sociologie et d'économie régionales*, 13, June 1985, pp. 5-15.
45. Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn, *Le Chômage...*, p. 120.
46. Tollet, 'Emploi et chômage...'
47. Cf. The report on 'Technological Developments and Public Service' drawn up by M. Lacomblez, D. Lienard and A.S. Pollet for the Dublin Institute for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
48. Marcelle Stroobants, 'Evolution de l'emploi et transformations des systèmes de travail dans les industries chimiques', *Critique régionale*, 7, September 1981, pp. 8-23. This article summarises the findings of studies carried out in connection with the EEC's FAST programme. Cf. *Les Perspectives d'emploi dans la chimie européenne*, Brussels, CEPEC, 1981.
49. Benjamin Coriat, 'Ouvriers et automates, procès du travail, économie du temps et théorie de la segmentation de la force de travail', in *Usines et ouvriers*, Paris, Maspero, 1980, pp. 40-76.
50. Cited, G. Labiche and G. Benussan, *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1982, p. 150.
51. Touraine *et al.*, *Le Mouvement ouvrier*, p. 321.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 347.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 384-385.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

BEYOND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY*

Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman

In this essay, we seek to answer two closely related questions: first, why socialists in advanced capitalist countries should want to move beyond social democracy; and secondly, what are the requirements and implications of such a move. Until not so long ago, the first of these questions would have seemed rather indecent: *of course* all serious socialists wanted to move beyond social democracy. Today, no such intention or desire can be taken for granted. For even where there is sharp criticism of the limitations and derelictions of social democracy, there is also an implicit acceptance of it, based upon a despairing uncertainty about what *else* is possible. So both questions do need to be probed.

An answer to the ~~first~~ of them—why socialists should want to move beyond social democracy—requires a brief recapitulation of its nature and record. An initial distinction needs to be made for this purpose between social democracy before 1914, and social democracy after World War I and particularly since 1945. In its earlier formative phase, social democracy unambiguously stood for the wholesale **transformation** of the social order, from capitalism to socialism, on the basis of the social appropriation of the main means of production, distribution and exchange, a far reaching democratisation of the political system, and a drastic levelling out of social inequality. This was to be achieved by way of a long series of economic, social and political reforms, to be brought about by way of a parliamentary majority reflecting a preponderance of electoral and popular support. There were many differences between socialists as to the precise nature of the reforms to be realised, and the strategy to be employed in their advancement; and there were also revolutionary socialists in the ranks of social democracy, of whom Rosa Luxemburg was the most notable representative, who proposed a strategy of mass struggle far removed from the electoralism and parliamentarism of the predominant current. Still, 'reformists' could still very plausibly argue that they too were fully committed to the socialist project. As Jean Jaurès once said about the French Socialist Party, 'precisely because it is a party of revolution. . . the Socialist Party is the most actively reformist.'

*We are very grateful to Leo Panitch and John Saville for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

What gave 'reformism' its pejorative connotations and made it all but synonymous with class collaboration and betrayal was not its reliance on gradual reforms as a path to socialist transformation, but the support for the war by the leaders of the Second International in August **1914** (and after) and their fierce opposition to left internationalists, of whom **Lenin** was of course the most conspicuous figure. With the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia in October **1917**, Lenin's strictures against the 'reformist traitors' acquired a unique global authority and resonance. This has greatly affected the debate on the Left on the question of what strategy is most likely to advance matters, in socialist terms, in advanced capitalist countries with capitalist-democratic regimes. The debate has in fact often been conducted by the revolutionary Left in rather simplistic terms: on the one hand, reformism equals socialist betrayal; on the other, revolution equals socialist rectitude. But the questions that need to be raised in regard to the appropriate socialist strategy for these countries cannot be resolved in these terms.³

More will be said about this later, but the point that needs to be made here is that so far as social democracy after **1914** is concerned, the 'reformist' label has been of ever-decreasing relevance to its actual purposes, and is in fact quite misleading. For the purpose of social democracy, as expressed in practice by labour movements and parties everywhere since World War I has not been a 'reformist' socialist project in the classical sense at all. From that time onwards, and more and more definitely, it has in essence been a project of moderate reform within the framework of capitalism, a striving, at best, to achieve a better deal for organised labour and the 'lower income groups' inside capitalist society; and this has been linked to the wish to see the state make a more effective contribution to the management of capitalism. Social democracy became more and more attuned to the requirements of capitalism; and where these requirements clashed with reform, it was reform that was more often than not sacrificed on the altar of the 'national interest', 'pragmatism' and 'realism', or whatever else might serve to cover up compromise and retreat. The 'reformist', transformative project has remained part of the occasional rhetoric of social democratic leaders, to be brought out on suitable occasions such as party conferences; but the rhetoric has been consistently belied by the actual practice of social democracy. The most it has ever striven to achieve is capitalism with a more human face: the record is consistent across time and countries and continents— from Attlee to Wilson and Callaghan in Britain, from **Léon Blum** to Guy Mollet to Mitterrand in France, from Ebert to Brandt to Schmidt in Germany, etc.

Certainly, it would be quite wrong to ignore or undervalue the reforms which social democracy has helped to achieve in capitalist societies over the years, or the important role which its presence and pressure have played in forcing issues and policies on the political agenda which other-

wise would have been ignored or differently handled. But acknowledging this and giving it its full weight should not obscure the deeply negative aspects of the record.

For one thing, social democracy has consistently sought to *limit* the scope and substance of the reforms which it has itself proposed and implemented, in an endeavour to pacify and accommodate capitalist forces, and to demonstrate how much these forces could count on the 'moderation' and 'reasonableness' of their social democratic opponents; and also because social democratic leaders in office have always readily endorsed conservative economic policies and submitted equally readily to the constraints this has imposed upon them. As a result, social democratic reforms, however useful, have tended to have a limited character and impact, and have been very vulnerable to conservative attack. Even when circumstances were most favourable, for instance in the years after World War II in such countries as Britain and France, when popular readiness and support for radical change was very high, it was timidity rather than boldness, submission to convention rather than innovative zeal which characterised social democratic reforming measures.

Secondly, social democracy has generally been deeply concerned to narrow the scope of political activity, to confine it as far as possible to carefully controlled party and parliamentary channels, to restrict and stifle **grassroots** activism except in the service of the party's electoral interests. Much of the energy of social democratic leaders has been devoted to the containment and channelling of the energies of their rank and file, and to the control of that rank and file by the party apparatus; and much the same concern has been evident among trade union leaders as well.

Thirdly and relatedly, social democratic leaders have always reserved their most energetic attacks for left activists in the labour movement. Social democratic hostility to the Left was already fierce and pervasive long before the Bolshevik Revolution and the coming into being of Communist parties. But the establishment of Soviet Russia and of Communist parties gave a new dynamic and legitimation to the struggle against anyone who demanded more radical policies and actions than social democratic leaders were themselves prepared to endorse, and provided these leaders with a convenient bogey to use against their opponents on the left, whatever their particular brand of socialism might be. Social democratic leaders, in parties and trade unions thus turned themselves into very effective watchdogs against the spread of socialist ideas and influence in the labour movement: no conservative politician could hope to have anything like the same impact in this respect. The effect of these endeavours has been of immense importance in the history of labour movements everywhere.

Fourthly, social democratic opposition to anything to the left of social democracy played a major role after 1945 in mobilising labour movements, or those parts of labour movements under their control, behind

the global counter-revolutionary crusade which capitalist governments have been waging since World War II under the leadership of the United States. Again and again, it is the social democratic leaders of Western European labour movements who have proved the most faithful and dedicated supporters and allies of the United States in this global enterprise, with the excuse that what was at stake was the defence of the West, freedom, democracy and the rest, against the dire threat of Soviet expansionism and aggression.

It would have been perfectly possible for social democratic leaders to oppose the installation after World War II of Soviet-type regimes on countries contiguous to the Soviet Union without lending their authority to what has undoubtedly been one of the great myths of the second half of the twentieth century, namely the myth of Soviet **expansionism**.³ Social democratic leaders did not choose that option, and thus made a major contribution to the granting of respectability to that myth. In the same context, these same leaders played a major part in supporting and defending the defence policies of the United States, notwithstanding the fact that these policies have been dominated by American determination to maintain a preponderance in nuclear weaponry: at no point have social democratic leaders made a serious contribution to the curbing of the arms race.

Finally, social democracy played a notable—and utterly dishonourable—role in the post-war decades in waging war, or in supporting the waging of war, against independence movements in the colonial territories of their countries. French social democracy was at the very centre of the murderous struggle waged against the independence movements in Indochina and Algeria, with names like Robert Lacoste and Guy Mollet forever inscribed in annals of shame; and British social democracy was similarly involved in the struggles of the 1940s and 1950s in British colonial territories—in Malaya and Kenya, in Cyprus and Aden. Nowhere and at no time in those years did social democratic leaders anywhere in imperialist countries show **any** sign that they took the notion of socialist internationalism seriously.

In short, the record shows quite conclusively that social democracy has never posed any real threat to the structure of domination and exploitation of capitalist societies. Throughout, its leaders have clearly demonstrated that they have been concerned with the management of capitalism, not its supercession; and in the field of defence and foreign affairs, they have always been much more the colleagues of conservative politicians than their opponents. *In* practice, there has existed a very high degree of consensus on the broad lines of policy, based upon the acceptance by social democratic leaders of the policies of conservative governments: occasional disagreements on specific issues, however sharp, have not fundamentally disturbed this consensus. The point is particularly applicable to defence and foreign policy; but it is hardly less relevant in other fields

as well.

There have always been many socialists in the ranks of social democratic parties who have opposed their leaders and sought to push them and their parties in more radical directions. They have on occasion had some successes, and their efforts have no doubt also prevented their leaders from moving even further in the direction of compromise and retreat. However, it must be noted that this socialist opposition inside social democratic parties has never managed to 'capture' these parties for the Left and given them a decisively different orientation and sets of programmes and policies. Social democratic leaders of the Centre and the Right have remained in command of their parties, and have continued to determine their policies and actions, notwithstanding the concessions they have occasionally had to make to their critics.

Nor does there seem to be any very good reason for thinking that matters are likely to be very different in the future. It is of course possible—indeed likely—that socialists will continue to extract occasional concessions from their leaders, in programmatic and even in practical terms; and it is equally possible that the pressure of events will compel these leaders to adopt different policies, even somewhat more radical ones—that they will, for instance be compelled to take a greater distance from American defence and foreign policies and seek to act as a more 'restraining' influence on the United States than has been the case in the past. To a limited extent, some such shift in these areas has already occurred in the years of the Reagan Presidency.

Anything of this sort must of course be welcome from a socialist point of view. But it should on no account obscure the fact that any such variation in programme or action occurs within a social democratic framework which is very set and solid. What socialists confront here—or ought to confront—is an ideological, political, even psychological, construct of great strength, which is open, flexible, loose on its right, but which is very unwilling, even unable, to yield much on its left. In other words, social democratic leaders find it much easier to compromise and consort with their conservative adversaries on the right than with their socialist critics on the left.

In seeking to explain the reasons for their opposition to the policies advocated by the Left, social democratic leaders themselves have often advanced the view that whatever the merits of these policies might be, extreme caution must be exercised in proposing anything which 'the electorate' could find 'extreme' and therefore unacceptable. On this view, the reluctance of social democratic leaders to endorse, let alone initiate, radical policies, is not due to their own predilections, but to their realism, and to their understanding of the fact that to move too far ahead of 'public opinion' and advocate policies for which 'the public' is not ready is to court electoral disaster and political paralysis.

This raises some very large and important points. It is undoubtedly true that 'the electorate' in the capitalist-democratic regimes of advanced capitalist countries does not support parties which advocate, or which appear to stand for, the revolutionary overthrow of the political system; and 'the electorate' here includes the overwhelming mass of the working class as well as other classes. This rejection by the working class and 'lower income groups' in general of parties committed or seemingly committed to the overthrow of the political and social order is a fact of major political importance, to say the least.

However, this does not at all mean that organised labour, the working class and the subordinate population of advanced capitalist countries (which constitutes the vast majority of their population) is also opposed to far-reaching changes and radical reforms. Social democratic parties have themselves been driven on many occasions to proclaim their **trans-**formative ambitions in their electoral manifestoes, and to speak of their firm determination to create 'a new social order'; and have nevertheless scored remarkable electoral victories with such programmes. Popular commitment to radical transformative purposes may not, generally speaking, be very deep; but there has at any rate been very little evidence of popular revulsion from such purposes.

The notion that very large parts of 'the electorate', and notably the working class, is bound to reject radical programmes is a convenient alibi, but little else. The real point, which is crucial, is that such programmes and policies need to be defended and propagated with the utmost determination and vigour by leaders totally convinced of the justice of their cause. It is *this* which is always lacking: infirmity of purpose and the fear of radical measures lies not with the working class but with the social democratic leaders themselves.

The same point must be made about social democratic **governments**. Such governments have never been disavowed by the working class because they were too 'extreme' or radical or over-zealous in pressing forward with reform: on the contrary, they have been disavowed precisely because they have regularly retreated from the promises enshrined in their manifestoes, because they have adopted policies that ran counter to these promises, because they disillusioned and demoralised their supporters, and because they gave every indication that there was little to expect from their continuance in office. It is in this connection very odd that the lamentations which are so often heard on the Left about the decline of working class support for social democratic parties do not take greater account of the record of social democratic governments: the wonder is not the decline, but the resilience of support which, despite everything, endures for such parties in the working class and beyond.

It is also an important part of the picture that social democratic retreats and derelictions have disastrous repercussions on the labour movement. As

social democratic governments retreat, so division and strife inside social democratic parties grow. The Left protests and attacks the leadership and seeks to deflect it from its courses; and the leadership turns on the Left and accuses it of disloyalty. Conservative forces rejoice; and the working class, or a large part of it, remains alienated or is further alienated from a divided and warring party.

We are therefore driven back to the leadership of social democratic parties. Again and again, social democratic governments have been elected with substantial, sometimes sweeping, parliamentary and popular majorities, on programmes of extensive reform and renewal, in a climate of genuine enthusiasm and support, and have very soon flagged and dissipated that enthusiasm and support, and retreated into the positions and policies just described.

It is of course true that even very 'moderate' and compromising social democratic governments confront very serious economic and financial constraints; that such governments operate in a generally unsympathetic or frankly hostile administrative context, in which other parts of the state tend to view social democratic ministers as interlopers; that they are subject to constant and often virulent attacks from an overwhelmingly conservative press; and that all conservative forces want to see the 'experiment' brought to an end as soon as possible, and do what they can to hasten the day.

All this must indeed be taken into account. It is perfectly **reasonable**—indeed essential—to appreciate the determination of this opposition even to social democracy. The point, however, is that most social democratic politicians are very ill-adapted to the politics of confrontation and struggle, at least with their conservative opponents—it is otherwise with their own activists on the Left.

This is not a matter of character but of ideological dispositions. Those who get to leadership positions in social democratic parties are generally 'safe' people, who can be relied on to pursue 'moderate', 'reasonable', 'sensible' courses. A process of co-optation, sifting and selection is at work on the way up, so that people who are deemed to be ideologically and politically 'unsound' can be kept at arm's length, and pushed back to the periphery of the party. The apparatus itself is under the control of 'moderate' men and women, and is used quite ruthlessly to ensure that the right people are brought in and the wrong people kept out. Where left socialists do nevertheless break through and cannot easily or safely be prevented from obtaining ministerial office, they are at least kept out of strategic offices such as finance, home affairs, foreign affairs and defence.

For most social democratic politicians, capitalist society (in so far as the existence of capitalism is acknowledged at all) is not a battlefield on which opposed classes are engaged in a permanent conflict, now more acute, now less, and in which they are firmly on one side, but a

community, no doubt quarrelsome, but a community nonetheless, in which various groups—be they employers, workers, public employees, etc—make selfish and damaging demands, which it is the task of government to resist for the good of all; and it is a community in which help must naturally be extended to the weakest members. On this view, what is required of government, and what a social democratic government is peculiarly well able to provide, is good will, understanding, fairness, compassion, so that specific problems may be tackled and resolved; and it also follows that social democratic leaders, in practice as distinct from rhetoric or even sentiment, are by no means separated from their conservative opponents by an unbridgeable gulf. On the contrary, there are many channels of communication, understanding and even agreement between them. The business of social democratic leaders is conciliation and compromise. Their concern may be to advance reform, but also to contain the pressure for it. Gramsci spoke of intellectuals as 'managers of consent': the formulation is even more applicable to social democratic politicians. As such, they play a major role in the stabilisation of the politics of capitalist-democratic societies.

Given this, it is easy to understand why social democratic politicians, with the partial exception of Salvador Allende in Chile, have never sought to probe the limits of 'reformism', and have always retreated long before they faced a serious confrontation with conservative forces. To have done so would have required them to assume the leadership of a mass movement from which their whole view of the world led them to recoil. It is simply not realistic to expect such people to provide the inspiration and the leadership required to bring about a transformation of capitalist society in socialist directions: the task demands, at the very least, a set of ideological commitments which they do not possess.

What then, in socialist terms, is there beyond social democracy?

There have over the years been a good many different answers to this question. One of the main ones, of Leninist inspiration, proposes the building and nurturing of a 'vanguard' party, tightly organised on 'democratic centralist' lines, involved in a daily class struggle at the point of production and at all other points of tension in capitalist society, with the expectation that capitalist crisis must ultimately reach a point at which it will become unmanageable, as a result of which it will no longer be possible to contain popular anger within the confines of the political system. At that point, a revolutionary situation will have come to exist, which will make it possible for the 'vanguard' party to seize the moment and lead the working class towards a seizure of **power**. The bourgeois state will be smashed, and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat, on the basis of proletarian power, workers' councils and other authentically democratic forms.

Those who propose this strategy are well aware that in no advanced capitalist country has this 'scenario' come anywhere near to being realised. But they are of course able to argue that the realisation of the 'scenario' is only a matter of time, that the crisis is not yet far enough advanced but is developing, that the working class is still in the grip of social democratic 'reformist' illusions, but that it is bound to acquire greater class consciousness under the impact of events, and so forth. Some such beliefs have for many years—in fact since 1917—sustained a core of dedicated militants and revolutionaries in all advanced capitalist countries, and indeed in all other countries as well.

However, it needs to be said, that this revolutionary 'scenario' even with a marked aggravation of capitalist crisis, is very unlikely to be realised in advanced capitalist countries. If or when a revolutionary situation does arise in one or other such country, the chances are that it will play itself out very differently from what is envisaged in this 'scenario'.

This, however, is speculation of a fairly futile kind. For a very long time to come, what socialists will confront is crisis and conflict, but quite emphatically not a revolutionary situation; and all experience very strongly suggests that parties and groupings which base their intervention in political life on the lines just indicated, condemn themselves to marginality and ineffectiveness. Their problem is not that they are unable to attract any serious measure of popular support: the real problem is that they have generally proved unable to attract any serious measure of activist and socialist support.

There are a number of reasons for this. One of them is that the notion of a tightly-organised, democratic-centralist organisation has proved to be a very good recipe for top-down and manipulative leadership, for undemocratic centralism and the stifling of genuine debate, sharp divisions and resort to expulsions, and a turn-over of members so high as to make the organisation a transit camp from innocence and enthusiasm to disillusionment and bitterness. Only the leadership remains permanently entrenched, presiding year after year over a constantly renewed membership, and virtually irremovable save by internal upheavals, splits and excommunications. Parties and groupings such as this have shown very little capacity to think through the problems which the socialist project presents, and have tended instead to resort to incantation and sloganeering as a substitute. They have often included some very talented individuals, who have made important contributions to socialist thinking. But the groupings themselves have generated remarkably little that was fresh and innovative: the ardour and dedication of their members have more often than not been doomed to ineffectiveness because of the shortcomings of the organisations of which they were members and the distrust which these shortcomings engendered among socialist activists in the labour movement whom they needed to attract.

Secondly, the very notion of a 'vanguard' party has acquired an arrogant and 'imperialistic' ring, quite unacceptable in labour movements with a long history and with many different and contradictory or at least disparate tendencies. Vanguard parties are by definition unique and dominant: there cannot be two or more such parties. But it is only by compulsion and coercion that one party can impose itself as the 'vanguard' or 'leading' party. In the circumstances of advanced capitalist societies, with a high density of different organisations, interests, purposes, tendencies and aspirations, a socialist party can only expect to be one element in a comradely alliance between different formations. It may hope, by virtue of its conduct, clear sightedness and support, to become a major reference point in that alliance, even a senior partner in it, but without any pretension to an arbitrary and stifling predominance.

This is not only a matter of strategy in struggle. It raises larger issues concerning the political system appropriate to a socialist society. All the available evidence suggests that the concept of 'the leading party' (in effect the monopolistic party) tends to produce authoritarianism and the suppression of dissent—indeed the construal of all dissent as counter-revolutionary and therefore unacceptable. There are no doubt circumstances of extreme peril where diversity, pluralism, and conflicting tendencies are very difficult to maintain: but failure to maintain them should be seen for what it is, namely a major retreat from socialist principles. What happened to the Bolshevik Party after the banning of 'factions' at the Xth Party Congress in 1921 offers an instructive lesson of what such banning entails for the life of a revolutionary party.

A further reason for the marginalisation and relative ineffectiveness of 'Marxist-Leninist' revolutionary groupings in advanced capitalist societies has to do with their failure to take seriously the context of capitalist democracy in which they operate. These groupings tend to treat capitalist democracy as a complete sham; and therefore to accord a wholly subordinate place to electoral struggles, a form of activity for which they have great contempt. Whereas social democratic parties suffer from 'parliamentary cretinism', they tend to suffer from something akin to 'anti-parliamentary cretinism'. The fact is, that whatever the limitations of capitalist democracy may be—and they are drastic enough—no party or grouping operating within its context can afford not to seek some degree of electoral support, not least at local level. This requires a great deal more than a sudden irruption on the scene at election time.

What then, has been—and should be—the socialist alternative to these groupings? It has already been argued here that social democratic parties cannot realistically be taken to be such an alternative. That alternative entails a firm revolutionary commitment, namely the wholesale **trans-**formation of capitalist society in socialist directions. But it also involves a 'reformist' commitment, in so far as it also seeks all reforms which can be

seen to form part of the larger revolutionary purpose.

Such 'revolutionary reformism' involves intervention in class struggle at all points of conflict in society, and pre-eminently at the site of work. It also involves electoral struggles at all levels and conceives these struggles as an intrinsic part of class struggle, without allowing itself to be absorbed into electoralism and parliamentarism; and it also means the permanent striving to strengthen the socialist presence on the political scene and in the political culture.

It should also be said that 'revolutionary reformism' does not postulate a smooth and uneventful transition to socialism by way of electoral support and parliamentary majorities. It acknowledges that, in the context of capitalist democracy, such a transition requires a massive degree of popular support and commitment, one of whose expressions (but by no means the only or even the most important one) is electoral strength and parliamentary representation. But 'revolutionary reformism' is also bound to be very conscious of the fact that any serious challenge to dominant classes must inevitably evoke resistance, and will be determined to meet that resistance with every weapon that this requires, including of course the mobilisation of mass support.

In historical terms, the parties which have embodied this 'revolutionary reformism' are the Communist Parties of the advanced capitalist countries (and others as well for that matter). To say this may seem paradoxical, since they themselves have always fiercely rejected the 'reformist' label, not surprisingly given the pejorative connotations it acquired after 1914. But the labelling is nevertheless wholly justified—it is in fact the 'revolutionary' part which may be the more problematic.

The reason for saying it is justified is that after the first years of *Sturm und Drang* following the Bolshevik Revolution and the foundation of these parties, it came to be understood that the overthrow of capitalism was not on the agenda; and Communist parties installed themselves as best they could (and in so far as bourgeois governments allowed them to do so) in the political life of their countries, and became in fact if not in name 'reformist' parties with an ultimately revolutionary vocation, a strong engagement in class struggle, taking part in electoral contests, and pressing for immediate as well as long term gains and reforms. There were periods when twists in Comintern policy (for instance the 'third period', 'class against class', social democrats are 'social fascists' phase between 1929 and 1934) or the twists in Soviet foreign policy (the 'imperialist war' phase between 1939 and 1941) forced the parties back into a more 'revolutionary' position. But this represented the exception rather than the rule, and that position has not on the whole been taken up since 1945.

What was fundamentally wrong with these Communist parties was two things: first, their total subservience to Stalin's policies and purposes; and secondly, closely related to this, their mode of organisation. Enough

has been said and written about the Stalinism of Communist parties between the late twenties and the early fifties to take this as given here: for present purposes, it is enough to note the degree to which the combination of sectarianism and opportunism which characterised Stalinism, together with sudden changes of policy imposed from Moscow, blighted their politics and blunted their political effectiveness.

As for their mode of organisation, the 'democratic centralism' to which they subscribed, and which the nature of Stalinism made imperative (how else could total obedience be imposed?), helped to foster all the vices which have been discussed earlier, and which turned these parties into profoundly undemocratic institutions, in which 'deviation' was impermissible, and in which the word of the leadership was law, whatever that word might be, and however much the word of the moment contradicted the word that had gone before. Attempts might be made to provide the leaders with a simulacrum of democratic legitimation by the holding of Party Congresses. But these were manipulated and stunted affairs, which gave no real power or influence to 'ordinary' members.

Unquestioning subservience to the Soviet Union by Communist parties has generally speaking given way to a more flexible stance, though parties differ in the degree to which they allow themselves freedom to criticise Soviet policies and actions. On the other hand, 'democratic centralism' endures as a principle of organisation, and ensures the perpetuation of the stultifying practices of the past. Old habits die hard, particularly when they are so convenient to a leadership thus rendered irremovable by the party membership.

These are crippling weaknesses; and there is also much else in the mode of operation, the policies and positions of Communist parties which warrants severe criticism. But they are much less vulnerable to the charge which is usually levelled against them by their 'Marxist-Leninist' opponents on the Left, namely their 'reformism'. For there is a profound, fundamental sense in which revolutionary parties, in the context of capitalist democracy, do need to engage in a politics which it is very glib to denounce as 'reformist', and therefore as beyond the pale.

The real question is what kind of 'reformism' parties which affirm a revolutionary vocation actually do engage in. At one end, there is the 'revolutionary reformism' which was discussed earlier. At the other, there is a 'reformism' constituted by a practice which tends increasingly towards social democracy and is increasingly oblivious to the larger transformative purposes in which reforms are or ought to be inscribed, which comes to be dominated by electoral calculations to the detriment of principle, is more concerned with the control of class struggle than with its encouragement, and allows policy to be chopped and changed according to the opportunistic manoeuvres of party leaders. The French Communist Party provides a very good example of this kind of 'reformism'. The Italian

Communist Party, on the other hand, mirrors well the struggle between the two kinds of 'reformism'.

If it is the case, as has been argued here, that 'revolutionary reformism' (or whatever else the position encompassed by the formula may be called) does represent an alternative to social democracy, and points in realistic fashion beyond it, the very large question which this poses is what agencies are to push this forward. The argument so far developed is clearly intended to suggest that social democracy does not offer any reasonable hope of turning itself into such an agency; that Communist parties carry burdens from the past which make it very difficult for them to undergo the process of transformation which is required for the purpose; and that 'Marxist-Leninist' groupings to the left of Communist parties operate in far too narrow an ideological and political framework to make it possible for them to ~~turn~~ themselves from small sects into substantial parties.

How this situation will be resolved is not clear, and will in any case be resolved differently in different countries. In some, Communist parties may come to shed their negative features and form the basis for a socialist realignment on the Left; in others, that realignment will have to come from other left sources. However it comes to pass, the process is likely to be protracted: serious socialist parties cannot suddenly be conjured up out of nothing.

Be that as it may, the point is that the socialist cause needs political articulation, and that this political articulation, though not exclusively provided by parties, does nevertheless require the agency of party. However useful and effective other elements of pressure in the political system may be—trade unions, movements of women, blacks, ecologists, peace activists and many others—they cannot and do not for the most part wish to ~~fulfil~~ the main task of socialist parties, which is to inject a 'stream of socialist tendency', by word and action, into the political system and culture of their societies. Such parties are of course concerned with immediate issues, grievances and demands; but they are also, beyond this, concerned with the effective dissolution of the structures of power of capitalist society and their replacement by a fundamentally different social order, based upon the social ownership and control of the main means of economic activity, and governed by principles of co-operation, civic freedom, egalitarianism, and democratic arrangements far superior to the narrowly class-bound arrangements of capitalist democracy.

Many parties of the Left have advocated these principles over the years. For reasons given earlier, they have also suffered from great weaknesses, which reduced or nullified their effectiveness. The sooner these weaknesses are faced, and overcome, the better will become the prospects of socialist advance.

NOTES

1. Quoted in A. Przeworski, 'Social Democracy as a Historical Phenomenon', *New Left Review*, No. 122, July-August, 1980, p. 25.
2. For an earlier discussion of these and related issues, see R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (1977). Ch. VI, 'Reform and Revolution'.
3. The 1984 *Socialist Register* was wholly devoted to 'The Uses of Anti-Communism' and discusses many facets of the issue.