

## ***MARXISM TODAY: AN ANATOMY***

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What do we expect from a monthly journal of the Left? Obviously it must be different, and distinguishable, from weekly journals such as *Tribune* and the New Statesman and Society. And with the explicit title of Marxism Today, which it must be assumed indicates a specific commitment to a **marxist** analysis in the elucidation of society, past, present and future, it would be reasonable to expect a serious review of the contemporary world. We would assume an historical **perspective** upon the world around us, one which included the kind of constant questioning of social reality to be found in the correspondence between **Marx** and Engels. It has always been the aim and purpose of Marxist analysis to help situate the individual within historical time; to relate the past to the present and to offer a variety of perspectives for the future; to make sense of individual purpose, a matter of self-enlightenment, within a wider social-political framework and setting. We have often been wrong, confused and blinded by a dogmatic reference to the past which has encouraged a false or one sided understanding of the present, and a mistaken prognosis of things to come. We are all, that is to say, human; but we have not always been mistaken, and readers of a journal that is titled Marxism Today expect a sharpness of intellectual approach which is serious, perceptive, and an encouragement to political action. Alongside all the criticisms we can make of ourselves, the last three decades have witnessed a significant revival of the critical spirit which moved the founding fathers. Marxism Today, after a decade or so of new editorial direction, has established itself as representative of a particular trend of thinking which it is the purpose of this present article to analyse; and to that end, the twelve issues of the year 1988 have been taken to illustrate the tendencies in editorial approach and thinking'.

Let us begin with Marxism Today's own survey of 1987 in the January 1988 issue as an index to their political and intellectual approach to the world as they see it. The survey covers twenty two pages, of which four are adverts, so there were eighteen pages of print and photographs. The Arts (music, films, theatre, TV) took eleven pages; fashion two; and one each to politics, political books, and one on Aids. And that was the year that was. The politics of 1987 were written up in a few limp words by Anthony **Barnett**. They made a passing reference to the general election of 1987 which was won for the third time by

Thatcher, but no analysis was offered nor was there any comment upon the state of the Labour Party other than a defence of the Chesterfield conference by **Hilary** Wainwright which was outside the review section proper. Nor was there any serious reference, or discussion, of the Stock Exchange crash of **1987**. It is, indeed, interesting that the editorial direction thought it proper to devote two pages to fashion against one to politics. The fashion article was listed in the Table of Contents as 'Sarah Mower examines the economics of the rising hemline', and the heading over the article itself was 'The New Legshow', a double spread with three **legfull** pictures of models wearing expensive dresses with such cute captions as 'Sweetie **Pie:Dressing** for **Lacroix** born again dolly bird' and 'Gianni Versace's inflated idea of wit in fashion'. Ms Mower was not, however, wholly abstracted from the real world, and she did at least mention the great crash of '87 with a reference to 'the climate of fear' that was its immediate aftermath. She even predicted a 'utility look' for **1988** in keeping with what she thought might be the harsher climate of the year to come.

This was certainly not the view of the editorial collective of Marxism Today. In earlier years as well as **1988** which is being considered here, there was a more or less constant refrain about the changes in British society that have been brought about by the economic successes presided over by Mrs Thatcher; and 1988, when all the signs were beginning rapidly to accumulate concerning the fundamental weaknesses of **large parts** of the economy, was just the year when *Marxism* Today's **halleluyah** chorus reached a high note. The editors have never been much taken with economic analysis; they have long cut any connection between base and superstructure, and it is ideology that is at the centre of their analysis of the New Times that we are now living in; but even they have on occasion to relate, however distantly, their description of the new society we now inherit to what it is that is providing all the **wonderful** new choices now opening before us.

There was no economic analysis in the January issue, and only a passing reference in **February** to our high economic growth in an article on foreign policy. But in March Frances Cairncross ('edits the Britain section of the Economist') wrote a page analysis of the background to the forthcoming budget of Nigel **Lawson** and what might be expected from it. Her approach was along the lines of editorial thinking. Britain, she wrote:

is now showing clear symptoms of post-election boom. Economists argue over whether the boom represents a once-for-all change in the economy's productivity. There are some signs that it does.

That argument begins from the Tory government's abolition of exchange controls and trade-union reforms. As a result, it postulates, British firms are now free to use capital and labour more efficiently. Their profits have therefore soared by 150% since 1980. That bonanza has allowed British firms to step up investment: imports of capital equipment have grown by 120% since the start of the 1980s. The modern machinery British companies have has been operated by fewer workers, **working** more effectively. Output per worker in manufacturing barely changed between 1974 and 1980; in the following six years, it rose by 40%.

As a result, British firms can now produce more, per worker and per pound of machinery,

than ever before and **can** work closer to **capacity** than they ever used to. On this theory, the **boom** is sustainable at something not far from present levels for many months to come.

And then, as is the economist's wont, Ms **Cairncross** offered certain qualifications: there were early signs of overheating of the economy, for example; but the general tone of the rest of her article clearly suggested that she was confident **Lawson** had matters pretty well under control. In his budget, **Lawson** would be carefully considering tax reductions 'which will not add too much to demand', by giving more to the rich ('who save more than the poor'), to companies ('who invest') and generally to encourage savings.

Ms Cairncross would be well advised to forget this particular piece of journalism, since most of its information was proved to be wrong. I write in November 1989 when the disastrous consequences of the **Lawson** occupation of No 11 Downing St have become evident to the world; and as will be recorded below, not all specialist commentators were as superficial as Ms Cairncross. There were warnings in plenty of the serious weaknesses of the British economy throughout the Thatcher years. Before **coming** to what the facts of the economic situation reveal about the British condition in the **1980s**, it may be helpful to provide the reader with examples of the ways in which the editorial team of Marxism **Today** interpreted the **Cairncross** analysis for the enlightenment of their constituency. Frank Mort toured the **Daily Mail** Ideal Home Exhibition and in the March 1988 issue he **summarised** what he believed to be the thinking of the salesmen and advertisers, with whom, it was clear, he was in full sympathy. He noted:

the new lifestyle politics of the **1980s**; the move to intensely personal private consumption. This is not just a return to earlier, traditional values. Nor does it line up as straight **cultural** conservatism. . . Changing class relations, the cultural impact of recession and feminism, the youth markets, and the 'new man' - this is what is up for grabs in campaigns. The argument goes like this. . . Cultural as well as economicsplintering of what were in the **60s** and **70s** solid market blocs (the working class, youth, the housewife etc) calls for a rethink. The market has filled up with segmented consumer profiles both up and down the scale: C 1 and C 2s, yuppies, sloanes, the **working** woman, gay men, the young elderly. A changed situation demands a different type of campaign. This is where the design input comes in. Lifestyle advertising, where the message is more 'emotional' than rational and informational, feeds off design and visual imagery. The idea is to create mood, where consumers experience their quintessential **individuality** in the product. Levis jeans, Saga holidays, Dr. White's, **all** work with this brief. Life style advertising is about differentiating oneself from the **Joneses'**, not, as in previous decades, keeping up with them. . .

And so on. Two months later, Mort co-authored an article with Nicholas Green which was listed in the Table of Contents as a look at the consumer boom, and the need to come to terms with the politics of prosperity. Its opening words:

Everywhere I go, up and down the country, I can't help noticing how prosperous people are looking. No, it's not Harold **Macmillan's** 'you've never had it so good' Britain, but we might be forgiven for thinking it is. Prosperity is in the air and the Tories are making the most of it. And it is not just about spending **power**. It goes hand in hand with a **cultural** vision of Lifestyles and social identities. Suddenly, as Janet Street-Porter put it, everyone wants a degree in creative shopping. How the Left responds to this - whether it engages with the

politics of prosperity or retreats into fundamentalism – is at the heart of the debate over socialist **renewal**.

Let the pundits and commentators argue it out whether there really has been that **economic** miracle. Looked at **from** the inside – from key sectors of the consumer economy – business has never been better. . . Part and parcel of the retail spiral is the boom in credit. The **current flexibility** and innovations of **finance** capital have set some of the conditions. Britons have taken to charge cards and plastic money like no other EC country. . .

Of course, the authors went on to comment, we know we have a growing current account deficit; we know that there has been an increasing casualisation of the labour market; and we know about the growing part-time youth and female work that is low paid, non-unionised and without basic employment rights. However:

But the point is we are talking about *cultural images* of **prosperity** here, not just economic theories and statistics. On that **score** – and at the level of popular experience – personal consumption has become a very potent emblem of national recovery indeed. The extra quid a week in the pay packet, the ability to muscle on in there and grab a piece of the action, to take out that loan – these things don't just provide a sense of personal power for 'you and yours', they have a way of saying symbolically that things must be **all** right in the country as a whole. **If** we are in work, Mrs Thatcher and the chancellor don't lecture us any more about backs to the wall, there is no alternative. Can't pay, won't pay. We get a pat on the back and **cash** in hand for enterprise and initiative rewarded

It was a long article that insisted on de-politicisation as a by-product of rising living standards and the increasing range of choice that more prosperous lifestyles brought with them. And for the future?:

**As** so often, **Thatcherism's successes** have forced the Left's hand. The current consumer boom has **rudely** pushed the issue on to Labour's agenda, demanding some sort of response. Where you stand on consumption seems to **be** becoming a litmus test over the whole issue of socialist renewal. In the red corner stands **Bennism** and the **fundamentalist Left**. In a rhetoric resonant of its evangelical past, markets here are cast as the very apogee of capitalist immorality, denying real freedoms and social decision making.

It is the recognition of consumer aspirations that must form the starting point for the socialist politics of the decades to come: the cultural politics of prosperity, as the authors sum up. The editorial collective of *Marxism Today* had already offered practical help by launching their own credit card (CRED CARD) in the January 1988 issue; and **their** publicity blurb to encourage membership must be taken as reflecting their own understanding of how their readers were reacting to the New Times ahead:

You might be feeling a little out of pocket this Christmas. Next year need not be the **same**. We are not suggesting you give up **all** those little luxuries that make **life** worth living: the odd meal at a restaurant, outings to cinemas, theatres, nightclubs, and gyms, not to mention **saturday's** shopping spree. But, we can try to make them less expensive. You can save a small fortune with our plastic discount card. It's accepted **all** over the country at the most convenient and stylish places.

And there followed a list – a short list – of shops, theatres etc where *Marxism Today's* Cred Card would be accepted; and this was followed by the rather surprising information that 'Our discounts include free meals

for a third person, two tickets for the price of one, free bottles of wine and club membership, as well as **press invites**. You can't afford to miss out'.

It is not clear how many did **miss** out since after this first advertisement there was no further **notice** in Marxism *Today* for the next twelve months; either they were overwhelmed with subscriptions or so many people missed out that the scheme folded. But it was an enlightening episode, not least for its implications of the good life as **understood** by Marxism Today's promoters.

The febrile statements that have been quoted above must not be thought to be out of line with the mainstream **thinking** of the editorial team of Marxism Today. In an article published in the Guardian on 31 March 1988, Martin Jacques, *MT's* editor, summed up his political approach in three main points of **which** the **Left** must take **full account** in all policy developments in the future. The first was 'The economy and competitiveness'; the third was 'The culture of the Labour Party', the need to **recognise** the new heterogeneous world in which we now live; and the middle point was 'Choice and the Consumer':

**Thatcherism**, over the past couple of years, has made these its own. Perhaps more than any other issue, they **symbolise** how Thatcherism feels of the moment. In the new world where leisure, wnsumption and the wnsumer have become more and more important, **so** choice has taken on a new significance. It is a way people express themselves, assert their identity and exercise their power.

By way of contrast, the **Left** still speaks only of basic provision and access. That's not wrong, but it's only part of the problem, and as such seems to address only the past, an old declining world where choice was simply about having or not having.

The **Benn-Heffer** position has nothing to say about choice and wnsomers. It moves in the traditional world of producers and production, forgetting that all those producers are consumers, and that wnsumption (**be** it video **recorders**, clothes, homes or holidays) occupies an increasingly important part in their lives.

The **Kinnock-Hattersley** position again is more **flexible**, more adaptive, but lives, one feels, in the shadow of Thatcherism.

Labour should be decisively in favour of a culture of consumerism, but one where access to it is not denied by the poverty of an **underclass**. If wnsumption now **looms** so large, then society has an obligation to ensure that everyone has **access** to **certain** social resources. Moreover, just as Labour wishes to see a **shift** in power from employer to worker so it should clearly stand for the consumer against the corporation. It might in rhetoric (when it remembers to say **so**): in practice it doesn't.

There is, naturally, a grand theory behind the emphasis upon the individual and the consumer society. It is most explicitly stated in the writings of Stuart Hall, a member of the editorial board or collective, but not of the editorial team. It is Stuart Hall's theoretical approach however that clearly infuses the editorial mind. In general, it is possible to identify a number of the central concepts that combine to form the Marxism Today analysis of contemporary society, and much of the illustration given below is taken from the published work of Stuart Hall, most of it in the journal itself.

1) Politics is overwhelmingly a matter of cultural discourse within ideology. Classical **marxism**, so Hall argued 'depended upon an assured correspondence between the 'economic' and the 'political': one could read off our political attitudes, interests and motivations from our economic class interests and position' (2) And this can today no longer be accepted. The 'correspondence' has disintegrated, both in theory and in practice, and the language of politics has therefore moved over to the cultural side. In his introduction to a volume of collected essays published in 1988, (3) Stuart Hall acknowledges that a main criticism of his writings had been the over-emphasis upon politics and ideology (Introduction, p.3) He accepted that Thatcherism was not only an ideological phenomenon and that he had given no 'substantial assessment' of the political economy of Thatcherism (pp.9 and 3); but – and it was a very large 'but' – matters of ideology and culture were not factors that were in any way secondary or dependent, and they must be understood to play a key role in the politics of the hegemonic perspective. 'Ideology' he argued, 'has its own modality; its own ways of working and its own **forms** of struggle'; and he reminds us of Gramsci's insistence that all economic and political processes have ideological 'conditions of existence', and that, in Gramsci's own words, 'popular beliefs. . .are themselves material forces'.<sup>2</sup>

Ideology, then, is of crucial importance, and it is the ideology of a new epoch: one that is distinct from the previous period of mass production, sometimes described as 'post-industrial', although Stuart Hall favours '**Post-Fordism**'. The era of post-Fordism embraces a range of new or newly developing characteristics: the decline in the traditional manufacturing sector and the rise of computer based industries; the falling proportions of the **skilled**, male, working class and the increase in the numbers of white collar workers and above all the 'feminisation' of the workforce; the increasing domination of the world economy by multinational companies and the globalisation of financial markets. It is emphasised in Hall's analysis that the processes of change are always uneven, and that it is necessary to look for the 'leading' edges of change to appreciate what the world of the twenty first century will be like. These changes at the base, although Hall does not phrase it in this way, are associated with broader social and cultural changes, and it is at this point that we begin to move into the area of ideology. There is taking place a weakening of the traditional solidarities, and the newly developing work processes, which offer flexibilities not hitherto enjoyed are linked with 'the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption'. A new individuality is being created, away from 'the lines of continuity which hitherto stabilised our social identities'. This re-forging of individuality leading to a transformation of social identities is a central concept in the New Times thinking of *Marxism Today*. A key passage from Stuart Hall's October 1988 article, from which the quotations given above have been taken, sets out the new analysis in striking words:

One **boundary** which '**new times**' have **displaced** is that between the 'objective' and subjective dimensions of **change**. The individual subject has become more important, **while** our models of 'the subject' have altered. We **can** no longer **conceive** of 'the individual' in terms of a whole and completed **Ego** or autonomous 'self'. The 'self' is experienced as more **fragmented** and incomplete, **composed** of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, 'produced', in process. These vicissitudes of the 'subject' have their own histories which are key episodes in the passage to 'new times'. They include the cultural revolutions of the **1960s**; '1968' itself, with its **strong** sense of **politics** as 'theatre'; feminism's slogan that 'the personal is political'; psychoanalysis, with its rediscovery of the **unconscious** roots of subjectivity; the theoretical revolutions of the **60s** and **70s** – semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism – with their concern for language and representation.

This 'return of the subjective' aspect suggests that we cannot settle for a language in which to describe 'new times' which respects the old distinctions between the objective and subjective dimensions of change. But such a conceptual shift presents problems for the **Left**. The conventional **culture** of the **Left**, with its stress on 'objective contradictions', 'impersonal structures' and **processes** that work 'behind men's (sic) backs', has disabled us from confronting the subjective in politics in any coherent way.

It was following this passage that Hall argued the assumed correspondence between the economic and the political no longer obtained, and that ideology is now an independent factor, hard, a material fact, as he **says** elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

If we assume that the 1988 issues of *Marxism Today* represent reasonably well the **thinking** in the editorial office, and of the editorial board, then what must be emphasised is the continual re-iteration of the success of the Thatcher years. Thatcherism, as Judith Williamson phrased it in her critique of the New Times approach, has been 'perceived as an endlessly adaptable, almost indomitable **force**'.<sup>4</sup> Throughout 1988 there was constant reference to the successes of Thatcherite ideology; to the intellectual and moral hegemony which Thatcher had secured; and to the recognition by the Thatcherites that the ideological struggle was of crucial importance. The reader could be forgiven for thinking that Thatcherism was unassailable. The sub-editors of the journal regularly provided **striking** confirmation of the apparently dogmatic belief in the political astuteness of Mrs. Thatcher herself, and of those around her. As late as November 1988, an article by Andrew Gamble on the economy – one of only two main articles in the whole year on the subject – was given the heading: "ON, AND ON, AND ON. . .? The Thatcher revolution keeps on rolling. A dominant party system could be in the making. The only cloud on the horizon, argues Andrew Gamble, is the economy". In the Table of Contents, the subtitle read: "As the Tories look forward to 10 more years, Andrew Gamble looks for clouds on the economic horizon". A subtle difference, it will be perceived. In one **heading** Gamble is searching for clouds on the economic horizon, which presumably might not be there, and above the article itself the reference is to "The only cloud on the horizon".

The intellectual subservience to Thatcherism, and to Mrs. Thatcher herself, was sharply etched for the readers in an article on foreign policy, in the February issue, by Malcolm Rutherford, another of the *Financial Times'* writers who seem to spend much of their spare time working for *Marxism*

**Today.** This was a highly instructive piece in three columns, **containing** within its short compass most of the illusions that crowd the minds of the editorial team. 'A Power Abroad' was the heading, and it began:

**British foreign policy is not what it used to be. Since the general election last year it has become more self-confident, and although the policy itself may not have changed much, Britain has begun to carry more weight around the world'**

One reason for Britain's changed stature, we were told, was that Thatcher has both experience, because of her many years in office, and, "abroad at least – respect as an elder statesperson". Another reason was "the halting and perhaps reversal of Britain's long relative economic decline". Britain also had, if not a special then a very close relationship with the United States; the old quarrels with Europe were over; Thatcher can now speak to the Americans with the backing and support of **Paris** and Bonn; and as a result east Europeans regard Britain "as in a pivotal position and Thatcher as a leader with some clout". After all, he went on, "she did not invent her relationship with Gorbachov, but it exists. It is as much his doing as hers". And he began to sum up:

**One may dispute whether British foreign policy in all these areas [referring to Africa and the Middle East] is right or wrong, or even how it should be defined beyond a general desire to maintain stability. But it has become harder than it used to be to argue that it is not of much consequence and is all based on posturing.**

Set into the article was a small photograph of Thatcher and Gorbachov waving to the camera, and subtitle: "Making waves in the world".

It is difficult not to describe this analysis as rigmarole, almost every word of which was either not true at the time it was written or has been proved wildly inaccurate in the months which followed its publication. But it was all too symptomatic of the thinking of the editorial team of **MT**. No one would guess, from a reading of all the **MT** of 1988 that the world has been a bitter and bloody planet ever since the end of World War **II**; that there have been dozens of wars, large and small, and **that** millions and millions have died or been maimed; that it is not only when the United States has been involved that large scale destruction has occurred, although we should never forget the infamous destruction and obliteration of so much of Korea and Vietnam; that these innumerable conflicts between **Third World** regimes have been consistently and steadily supplied with arms from the industrialised powers of the world; that the international trade in arms has become a significant part of the balance of trade of the United Kingdom – as in other countries. Once upon a time – before World War **II** – the labour movement in Britain regarded the arms manufacturers as immoral beings and the international trade in arms as **obscene**.<sup>3</sup> No more, and certainly not a subject these days for **MT** to debate and discuss. There is a very small country in central America called Nicaragua. The struggle of its government against rebel forces has affinities with the civil war in Spain between 1936 and 1939, although

the world wide sympathy of all decent people for the Spanish Republic has not been reproduced on the same scale for Nicaragua in spite of Solidarity committees in many countries. Why this is so will provide academic research with much interesting discussion in **fifty** years time when, as Tawney once remarked 'passion has **cooled** into curiosity, and the agonies of peoples have become the exercise of the schools'. The passion has already cooled for *MT*, for 1988 saw not one specialist article on Nicaragua. The only discussion came in Fred Halliday's serious and informative article in the June issue which surveyed the relations between the USA and the USSR and which – it really is so typical – was given the title by the sub-editors as 'The Ron and Mik' show. But Halliday considers the most important single matter of world politics: the fact that since World War II the United States has been at the centre of world reaction and has used its enormous resources to crush, curb and contain democratic and progressive movements in all continents. Halliday for the most part restricts his analysis to the last twenty years (as in his *The Making of the Second Cold War*) where his thesis is that in the **1970s**, and especially towards the end of that decade, there were fourteen social revolutions which weakened the international position of the US, but that since 1980 there have been no further successful revolutions, and the balance in the 1980s shifted in favour of the United States. The 'Reagan Doctrine' involved active support, financial and military, for right-wing **guerrillas** in the Third World. In American jargon, this is known as Low Intensity Conflict, military intervention short of a direct role for US troops. While the US support for the **contras** in Nicaragua has not overthrown the **Sandinista** government, the physical damage to the country has been enormous. But then, this is standard practice. Since World War Two the United States, as a result of direct or indirect intervention, has left a wide trail of devastation round the world. The Americans are stained with the blood of the millions of Third World citizens who have been butchered to keep the world safe for the property owners of the world; and America has been actively supported by its allies among the advanced capitalist **countries** and not least by the United Kingdom, whose record of subservience to America in world affairs has not been equalled by any of the other major states in the world.

In the introduction, already quoted, to his collection of essays, Stuart Hall emphasised our need to 'Submit everything to the discipline of present reality, to our understanding of the forces which are really shaping and changing our **world**'.<sup>6</sup> We may begin the process of submission by looking at the background to the euphoria – that is the correct word – the editorial team of *MT* have constantly expressed about the consumer society and in particular the **consumer** boom of the past few years. The basic facts however are not in dispute, nor have they been hidden from public view. Throughout the 1980s there have been serious commentators – financial journalists and professional **economists** – who have never believed the populist hype spread around by

much of the media, or the more academic pronouncements of Frances Cairncross et al.<sup>7</sup>

The British economy has for many decades been in relative economic decline compared with the most advanced industrial countries. Evidence of a lag in **productivity** in the manufacturing sector preceded World War I, and by 1939 the gap between the most advanced – the United States first and then Germany – was considerable. In the immediate aftermath of World War II the deficiencies in British manufacturing were becoming widely known. Wartime production had exposed grave deficiencies in the machine tool sector. The failure of the combined efforts of the War Office and British industry to produce a tank comparable in fighting power with those of Germany or the Soviet Union was in large measure an indictment of the engineering industry, although the stupidities of the planners in the War Office were not helpful. The Board of Trade files during wartime contain abundant documentation of the inefficiencies of much industrial production, and after the war there were a series of **Working Parties** as well as the Reports of the Anglo-American delegations concerned with productivity which offered a stream of evidence of what was wrong. There was also the beginning of academic enquiry, notably the work of the Hungarian-born economist Rostas, who worked at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. Rostas calculated that in the years before the outbreak of war in 1939, physical output per head in American manufacturing was over twice as high as in the United Kingdom, although if all branches of the economy were included the American superiority was somewhat reduced to between 1.6 and 1.8. The years of the Labour Governments after the war saw certain improvements but nothing of a radical **kind**, largely because Britain was in a seller's market, and all one had to do was to attract sufficient labour, and produce as much as possible, mostly along the traditional lines of organisation and management. In 1950 productivity in manufacturing in Germany was nearly forty per cent lower than in the United Kingdom; but then the story began to change. By 1980 manufacturing productivity in Germany was about thirty per cent higher than in Britain; and the same comparisons for the later period can be made with all other manufacturing countries. Labour productivity, and therefore the standard of living in Britain, have increased at a slower rate than in all Western Europe and Scandinavia. In Britain, the highest level of employment in post-war manufacturing was in the year 1968, since when there has been an uneven but steady decline by around forty per cent; and of that decline by far the largest share has taken place since 1979. This decrease in employment in the manufacturing sector by 3.5 million has been partly **offset**, but only partly, by an expansion in the service sector, and in other occupations. The corollary was an increase in unemployment: quite marked after the oil crisis of 1973 but accelerating sharply after 1979.8

The world crisis of 1973, the immediate cause of which was the very sharp increase in oil prices, was followed by a decade of slower growth; and this

was the situation inherited by the new Thatcher government in the summer of 1979. As a direct result of the policies of the new government – Geoffrey Howe was Chancellor of the Exchequer – Britain experienced the deepest recession of the twentieth century. Between 1979 and 1981 total output fell by over three per cent; manufacturing output declined by seventeen per cent; and unemployment rose from one million to 2.5 million. Inflation soared. The effective exchange rate, as a result of very tight fiscal and monetary policies, rose sharply; and about twenty per cent of Britain's manufacturing base was wiped out. By the end of 1981, the Thatcher government was deeply unpopular, and what saved the Tory Party was a combination of the gross ineptitude and bumbling incompetence of the Labour Opposition at Westminster, where Michael Foot was leader; the rapidly growing revenues from North Sea oil; and the Falklands War. Oil revenues reached a peak in 1984–5, and in all some £ 80 billion of tax will have been collected between 1979–80 and 1988–89. The total was diminishing fast in the closing years of the decade. There also flowed into the Exchequer the considerable profits from privatisation and from the steady and unrelenting squeeze on welfare benefits of all kinds: a matter which is further discussed below. The government has also benefitted from increased revenues following the upturn in the economy. After the devastating years of the early eighties, the economy began to pick itself up, and from about 1984 growth was considerable: not so markedly in the manufacturing sector, which only achieved the 1978–9 output levels nearly ten years later, but in the economy as a whole, as a result of the rise in consumer demand.

The Thatcher government came to power in 1979 with mostly unclear ideas about strategic economic policy except on two counts: breaking the trade unions and privatisation. They developed a stance which everyone, within the government and outside, believed was monetarist. In 1981 there was published the Financial Statement and Budget Report which emphasised that inflation could only be reduced by controlling the money supply, along with agreed fiscal policy; and in this Financial Statement target rates were set for the growth in money supply. These allowed fluctuations between a low range of sixteen per cent for the years 1981–4, with an upper limit of thirty per cent. As it turned out, the money supply rose by no less than fifty per cent in the three years 1981–4, and then, instead of slowing down as predicted in the Financial Statement, it accelerated sharply. Between 1984 and 1988 the money supply has increased at the rate of round about twenty per cent per annum, so that it has just about doubled in this period.<sup>9</sup>

The consequences have been crucial for the British economy. The first is consumer spending at levels not previously achieved. Since 1984 the growth in consumer spending has been at a rate of increase of five per cent a year: a record for any comparable period in the post-war years. The recovery in domestic output, for the most part, has been the result of this consumer boom, much fuelled, of course, by the very rapid enlargement of credit facilities

of all kinds. It was the enormous increase in imports that represented the most important consequence of government policy. For the first time in the industrial history of Britain there developed a deficit on the manufacturing balance of trade. In 1982 exports and imports of manufactured goods were almost equal, but beginning with 1983, when the difference was small, the gap between imports and exports has steadily widened. The manufacturing basis of the British economy was now too narrow, and it has remained so. De-industrialisation was already taking place long before 1979 – in part it is a by-product of increasing technical sophistication – but as an historical process it has been much more noticeable in Britain than in other industrial countries, and it was savagely increased in the deep recession of 1979–81. When consumer spending increased so rapidly from 1983–4, imports were sucked in at an ever increasing rate. The overall deficit on the balance of payments grew rapidly from 1987–8, and the estimate for 1989 is around 20 billion.

It is often argued that the growth of the service sector will make up for the loss of manufacturing enterprises. This is true only in part, although the argument has been widely used by apologists of the Thatcher government. In October 1985 there was published the Report of a House of Lords Select Committee on Overseas Trade. Its chairman was Lord Aldington, a former M.P. and deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, and the House of Lords debated the Report on 3 December 1985. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel **Lawson**, had already dismissed the Report on 13 November as not 'a helpful contribution to the debate' and he later added that the government 'wholly rejects the mixture of special pleading dressed up as analysis, and **assertion** masquerading as evidence, that leads the Committee to its doom-laden conclusion'. What the Report said was that since it was only manufacturing that created wealth, the decline in British manufacturing must be halted, and then reversed. They noted that manufacturing output in the 1983–4 years was 12 per cent lower than in 1973, while in the rest of the EEC, in the USA and in Japan, it was substantially higher. The Committee went on to demolish the myth that the services sector can compensate for the decline in manufacturing. And for two reasons: first, that an important part of the services sector depends on the manufacturing sector; and second, that the value-added of manufacturing exports is three times higher than services exports, with the result that a one per cent fall in manufacturing exports requires a three per cent rise in the export of services to make up the difference. The Report further noted that the share of world trade taken by British invisible exports has been declining at a faster rate than the fall in the share of manufactured exports. The House of Lords Select Committee took an impressive body of evidence from written statements and individual witnesses, and its Report represents a major statement of Britain's economic **problems**.<sup>10</sup>

What is constantly quoted by government apologists is that in spite of all the problems confronting the British **economy**, it is in fitter shape, with greater

productivity, than at any previous period in post war history. Certainly it is true that there have been substantial productivity increases in recent years, but they have not been as spectacular as often suggested, and they have, in fact, not been greater than in certain earlier periods of the post-war era, for which **see** below:

***Growth Rates in Manufacturing Output: Per Cent per annum***

Period	Output	Productivity
1950–55	3.21	1.75
<b>1955–60</b>	2.92	2.36
<b>1960–64</b>	3.16	3.67
1964–68	3.13	3.17
<b>1968–73</b>	2.78	3.77
1973–79	–0.70	0.68
<b>1979–86</b>	–0.67	3.64

Source: National Institute of Economic and Social Research: Economic Review, February 1989, p. 64.

The growth of Labour productivity rose in each successive cycle until 1973, to be followed by a marked slowdown in the **1970s**, followed by a recovery in the 1980s (and if figures for 1987 and 1988 were available the rise in productivity would probably be greater and the output level also higher). But with these qualifications, it will be appreciated that the 1980s record in manufacturing output and productivity was of a different order from any previous period: higher productivity on levels of output low by comparison with earlier years. It is when these trends are translated into international competitiveness that the seriousness of the British position in the world economy becomes clear. Britain's share of the world market in manufacturing in the 1980s remained well below the levels of earlier decades, and all the indices relevant to the measurement of competitiveness on the world market are showing adverse trends. At the end of the 1980s exports were growing at half the rate of imports, and only in chemicals and specialist **drugs** was Britain holding its share of the international market.

The international position of Britain during the Thatcher years has, then, worsened steadily, and the effects **will** work their way through to domestic levels of investment and employment in the decade which follows. But almost none of these basic facts were made available to the readers of *Marxism Today* through 1988. There was one article, and only one article, in the whole of 1988 that stated clearly the core problems confronting the British economy. This was in the July issue: an analysis by a Cambridge economist named John Wells which set forth in **straightforward** terms the grim facts of the British situation. The other article on the economy, by Andrew Gamble,

was nothing like as rigorous. But quite obviously the Wells' analysis made no impact at all upon the **thinking** of the editorial team; and they continued their irresponsible way, extolling the New Times of the consumer society and repeating the myths of Thatcherite success. So we find in November 1988 a review by Peter **Riddell** – another of the *Financial Times* helpers, this time a former political editor of the paper – which commented on Andrew Gamble's *The Free Economy and the Strong State* and Stuart Hall's *The Hard Road to Renewal*. **Riddell** makes one point of note, namely, that both authors assume a coherence to Thatcherism that is not to be found in practice; and that is a fair point, provided it is appreciated that Thatcherism is centrally concerned with **making** the rich richer and many of the poor poorer. **Riddell** ends on a typically *MT* assessment on the 'unassailability of Thatcher' thesis. There is nothing, he wrote 'in these books to cheer **Labour** supporters from their current depression about their prospects, or to disturb Tories in their current self-confidence' (p. 49). This was written, it must be recalled, in November 1988 when the problems which led to the resignation of Nigel **Lawson** in 1989 were already becoming very clear to most observers.

*Marxism Today* has misread the history of the 1980s in quite remarkable ways. They have mistaken a consumer boom, financed by politically motivated cuts in direct taxation together with the very high growth of the money supply in the public sector, and the rapid expansion of credit facilities in the private sector, for a turn-around in the continued decline of the British economy. The very large increases in oil revenues were used to pay for the redundancies and widespread unemployment which followed the twenty per cent reduction in the manufacturing sector between 1979 and 1981. The consumer boom had no basis at all in the real state of the British economy. The slide into a balance of trade deficit on manufactured goods was already beginning in 1983, and industrial investment and output remained below the levels of previous decades until the closing years of the decade. But it has been upon the consumer boom that the editorial collective have erected their own interpretation of social change, central to which is the belief in the **successful development** of what **they** commonly describe as the Thatcher project. They have, that is, examined only the surface phenomena of this past decade and assumed that this was the projection for the future. 1989 has confirmed their errors, and in **particular** has blown apart their singular acceptance of Tory propaganda about the unassailability of Thatcherism as a way of life. Recognition of their wrongheadedness, however, seems to be **taking** some time, as witness the keynote speech of *Marxism Today's* editor, Martin Jacques, to the British Communist Party Congress in late **November** 1989.

An analysis of the economy of a society is not, however, limited to the general factors making for fast or slow growth, or to a macro-economic discussion of the broad movements of the balance of payments or the relationship between economic growth and productivity in manufacturing

industry. The internal evolution of income distribution and the ownership of wealth are equally important, and bear immediately upon standards of living, and their changes. Very high growth rates set against a steep inequality of income distribution do little or nothing to help the poor, and **may** indeed make the poor poorer. Changes in the structure of the tax system – except for movements in direct income tax – are for the most part not comprehended by the mass of people. It is easy enough to appreciate the basic rate of income tax has been cut from 33 per cent to 25 per cent, and that the rate applied to the highest income from 83 per cent to forty per cent; but it is much more difficult to grasp the impact of changes in National Insurance Contributions, Capital Gains Tax, V.A.T., local rates; and so on. The importance of these different forms of taxation is underlined by the fact that during the decade of the eighties the revenue raised by direct taxation (income tax) fell from **32** per cent of all government income to **24** per cent (1978–9 to 1988–9).

In the years immediately following its assumption of office, the Thatcher government ended the link between pensions and other long term benefits, and average earnings; and instead benefits were now related to prices, which increased on an annual basis at a lower rate than earnings. The list of such benefits continued to be extended and by 1984 the Budget surplus from the savings incurred amounted to about **four billion pounds**. **Lawson** then abolished earnings-related unemployment pay. Pensions, of course, come out of the National Insurance Fund which is fed by contributions from those in employment, and it was therefore to be expected that when the **economy** started moving out of recession the National Insurance Fund began showing ever larger surpluses. The latest infamy has been to freeze child benefit for the last three years.

What we have had since 1979 has been a very marked redistribution from those on low incomes to the better off. If all direct taxes are taken into account – that is, all taxes plus all benefits – over the population as a whole and for the ten years to 1988–9, the bottom sixty per cent of the income distribution have lost while the top thirty per cent, and especially the top ten per cent, have gained. **Expressed in figures**, the bottom half of the population have lost **£6.6** billion and the top ten per cent have gained **£5.6** billion. Within that top ten per cent the gain for the top five per cent has been **£4.8** billion. If Marxism Today wanted to single out one component of the Thatcher project, this massive shift from the poor to the rich should be used to illustrate the real meaning of the project. Tax reductions for the rich go right across the board. Company tax rates, for example, are now among the lowest of all the advanced countries. At thirty five per cent (the tax is on undistributed profits) the British company tax rate compares with fifty six for Germany and fifty two for Sweden. With all the tax concessions that have been introduced in the past ten years it would be theoretically possible for someone with an income of a million pounds a year to avoid tax **altogether**.<sup>11</sup> With such generous

concessions to the rich, the very sharp increases in salary which company directors have been awarding themselves in the past few years makes very good sense. For the year to June 1989 the Guardian Index of Top Executives pay showed an average increase of 28 per cent after annual reports from 91 of the top 100 companies. Stuart Hall in the introduction to his recent volume, indicated how difficult he found the identification of the class interests represented by Thatcherism. These were his words:

. . . the effectivity of **Thatcherism** has rested precisely on its ability to articulate **different** social and economic interests within this **political project**. It is therefore a complicated matter to **say** in any precise sense which **class** interests **are** represented **by** Thatcherism (multinational **capital** 'lived' through the prism of petty bourgeois ideology?) **since** it is precisely **class** interests which, in the process of 're-presentation', are being **politically** and **ideologically** defined (pp. 4-5)

The first and obvious answer to Stuart Hall's difficulties is quite simply 'the rich'; and we could then take the class analysis from there. Whether these very wealthy beneficiaries of ten years of Thatcherism have difficulty in seeing themselves as they are, or whether it is through the prism of petty bourgeois ideology, darkly or clearly, may be left for another discussion; but whether at their watering holes in London's **clubland** or luxury hotels, they really have a problem of self identification may perhaps be doubted. There is no doubt, of course, that the Conservative Party did **win** considerable support from a wide spectrum of the electorate and that there are substantive economic and social changes constantly working upon attitudes, outlooks and perspectives, but we should not forget the absence of a political opposition for just about a decade; and we should not neglect the role of human agency in the formation of political ideas different from those of the dominant classes.

Reading these twelve issues of 1988 provides a strong sense of the incoherence in the politics of the editorial collective. They have seized upon certain characteristics of our contemporary scene and either mostly, or completely, ignored others. Eric Hobsbawm wrote a powerful analysis and criticism of three recently published pamphlets, the most important of which was the **Kinnock-Hattersley A Statement of Democratic Socialist Aims and Values**. His article appeared in the April 1988 issue of MT and also included comments on pamphlets by Tony Benn and a third by David Blunkett and Bernard Crick; but his main concentration was upon the Labour leaders. Their approach, he wrote, reflected two major weaknesses in Labour's thinking. The first was provincialism: 'the world beyond the seas is more remote and unimportant than in real life' (p. 15). And he went on to observe that not one other country was mentioned:

even when one might think it directly relevant to Britain. Sweden, for instance, is just the sort of country which one might expect to inspire anti-Thatcherite democratic socialists. It represents everything that Thatcherites blame for the failures of Britain in the dark **pre-Maggie** era: it has been run by Labour, has one of the highest ratios of public expenditure to **gross** domestic product, high **taxes**, no fondness for the unrestricted free market, and plenty of controls. Yet Sweden, which must have one of the highest standards of Living in the world, together with

low unemployment, has a much higher rate of growth than the USA and remains at the forefront of technological progress. Why should British Labour not get a little mileage out of the achievements of its opposite number elsewhere?

The second weakness, Hobsbawm went on to argue, was intellectual: a failure of vision divorced from an historical understanding of the ways in which Britain's past development has provided the framework for the present crisis. His essay was a highly pertinent commentary on the **Kinnock-Hattersley** approach and it happens also to be of direct application to the journal in which he was writing. It is extraordinary that during the whole year of **1988** there was not one major article on the place of Britain in the world. There were essays on the super-powers (by Fred Halliday), several articles on the **USSR** including interviews of intellectuals by Monty Johnstone, one extensive survey of Eastern Europe and for the rest short pieces on various countries round the world that were currently in the news: Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, Campuchea and so on. But no young socialist reading the pages of *Marxism Today* would gain that deep sense of the world family of women, men and children; of the universal presence of exploitation, in its many different forms; of the innumerable ways in the rich countries have always bled, and are still bleeding, the poor countries of the Third World; of a continuing support for the liberation movements round the globe. Does a regular reading of *Marxism Today* encourage a sense of solidarity with our brothers and sisters of the African National Congress?; or renew our support for the Intifada, or strengthen our commitment to Nicaragua?. We in the United Kingdom have had a civil war within our boundaries for the past two decades. It has led to many and serious breaches of the traditional civil liberties theoretically enjoyed under British constitutional practice; to over 2,000 deaths; to wholly illegal actions such as the shootings in Gibraltar; and to an almost total silence from the **1988** *Marxism Today*. In good Establishment company, let it noted. There have been seven general elections since British troops moved in to Northern Ireland and at not one election on the mainland did the Irish question move from the bottom of the agenda. Mostly it was never discussed.

It has always been one of the accepted characteristics of socialism, certainly in its **marxist** version, that internationalism – vigorous, supportive internationalism – is at the centre of its **general** ideas – and it is a tradition that finds regrettably little expression in the pages of *MT*. Of course, many of those in the past whom Marxists have honoured for their struggle against the evil forces of world capitalism would have been too **dogmatic**, too narrowly economic, too ready to 'read off' ideas from class interests, to suit the modern-day ci-devant sophisticates of *Marxism Today* for whom the crudities of the past are best forgotten. This presumably is at least part of the complex of reasons for the absence of any sense of history in the pages of *Marxism Today*. There is almost certainly no doubt of the theoretical inadequacies of the dogmatism of those who led The Long March; or of these German

Communists whose record in the concentration camps was so astounding and heroic; or of the 70,000 French communists who were killed in the Resistance movement; or the guerillas in El Salvador today and their nearby comrades in Nicaragua. The latter, undoubtedly, would be in better theoretical shape if only they had access to **MT's** elaboration of the 'New Times' we now live in.

To consider M h e r Hobsbawm's criticism of the intellectual **weakness** of the **Kinnock-Hattersley** pamphlet: its lack of an historical vision. This absence of history from the pages of **Marxism Today** has been commented on above, but it is very striking. It is, no doubt, a sign of the New Times the journal is preaching, for there has never been a **marxist** journal previously which has failed to relate the present with the past. Not always judiciously, of course, but whatever the failings, it is not in the intellectual nature of **marxism** to ignore the past. **Marxism Today** does just that, and this accounts for what was described earlier as the incoherence of its politics. Over the year, there were a number of serious articles published: some have already been quoted and in addition there was a an excellent piece by Andy Green on education in the January issue; a long and interesting essay on feminism by Cynthia **Cockburn** (April); Pat Devine on market socialism (June a good month's issue in general); Richard Smith on Alcohol and alcoholism. Most issues have something that is interesting, but there is too much candy floss and occasionally straight dross. The fault can only be editorial and this must at least in part be due to political confusion. Why, for example, do we have to have long interviews with well-known Tories: a flashy vulgarian called Edwina Cume; a man out of power such as Edward Heath, and the frenziedly ambitious Heseltine: these last two in the 1988 issues? And why does the page of letters on International Women's day (March) have to include one from Teresa Gorman, a Tory MP, who informed **MT's** readers that International Women's Day was'a lot of nonsense, nothing but hype'? It can be understood, given the general attitude towards Thatcherism, that readers had to see seven photographs or drawings of Thatcher herself in 1988 – in case any one forgot how successful the Thatcherite hegemony was, but this continuous effort to bring readers into touch with Tory ideas must be seen as the editorial belief that the business of learning from Thatcherism – one of **MT's** slogans – is far from completed. And here we come upon a matter of fundamental theoretical importance. What Stuart Hall, Martin Jacques and presumably the rest of the editorial collective, have failed to appreciate from the writings of Antonio Gramsci is that when he elaborated the idea of intellectual and moral hegemony he was describing the complicated web of institutions, social relations and ideas as a result of which the dominant class or classes were helped to maintain their political control. But he never assumed that coercion was absent from state power, and he always assumed that the central aim and purpose of the intellectuals allied with the working class movement was to attack the dominant ideas of the hegemonic classes

and create a counter-hegemony. And where do we find this counter-attack, this ruthless subjection of bourgeois ideas to dissection and critique, within the pages of *Marxism Today*? Almost nowhere; and what genuinely critical pieces there are, as with John Wells' analysis of the consumer boom, are neither followed through nor, it would seem, do they make any impact upon the thinking of the editorial collective who continue to misconceive the Thatcher project. In his commentary upon Bukharin in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci underlined the crucial importance of leaving the minor figures to 'petty daily **polemic**':

A new science[by which he meant Marxism] proves its efficacy and vitality when it demonstrates that it is capable of **confronting** the great champions of the tendencies opposed to it and when it either **resolves** by its own **means** the vital questions which they have posed or demonstrates, in peremptory fashion, that these are false problems.

It is true that an historical epoch and a given society are **characterised** rather by the average **run** of intellectuals, and therefore by the more mediocre. But widespread, mass, ideology must be **distinguished** from the scientific works and the great philosophical syntheses which are its real cornerstones. It is the latter which must be overcome, either negatively by demonstrating that they are without foundation, or positively, by opposing to them philosophical syntheses of greater importance and **significance**. Reading the *Manuel* [of Bukharin] one has the impression of someone **who** cannot sleep for the **moonlight** and who struggles to massacre the fireflies in the belief that by doing so he will make the brightness lessen or disappear (p. 433)

Gramsci would have been surprised to discover any group of Marxists so bemused by what they felt to be the apparent unassailability of the hegemony exercised by the propertied classes that they had virtually abandoned any serious critique of its intellectual and moral basis. Gramsci would have expected a serious and sustained critique of its leading ideas, and certainly not what this particular group of British disciples have offered: criticisms of marginal matters together with a large black hole of intellectual nothingness at the centre. We have seen that their understanding of the political economy of Thatcherism was woefully misinformed, and they have largely refrained from serious political discussion, which must involve the Labour Party, its policies and its personalities because that would, or might, have put them out of joint with mainstream Labour whose ambience apparently is congenial. An example of both the rejection of a radical past and an unwillingness to tread anywhere but the safe centre was the article on the Monarchy by Rosalind Brunt (September 1988).

The sub-editor's heading to her article was: "The Right Royal Opposition. The Royal Family is riding high in the popularity stakes – except with the government. But shouldn't it worry us, asks Rosalind Brunt, that the Monarchy is the best on offer in the way of moral opposition". One cannot usually fault authors with the absurdities of the sub-editors of any journal or paper, but on this occasion the phrases were not out of line with the tenor of the article. Brunt writes 'as a convinced republican who remains "enchanted" with the Royal Family' (and she is using 'enchanted' in Tom Nairn's sense in his *The Enchanted Glass*). At the same time, as is made

clear later, she has no wish to be identified with the 'cranky down-with-the-monarchy stuff'. Her essay is a remarkably confused piece of writing and argument. Her **sense** of history, and certainly of radical history, is meagre. It may be assumed that Tom Paine has never lived for Rosalind Brunt, and the famous denunciation of the monarchy in *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man* have remained unread by her. **Republicanism**, of course, has not been a serious issue of English politics since the early **1870s**; but socialists have always **recognised** that the monarchy is a central part of the conservative establishment, and not just because of the mummery involved. In a decently ordered society, that is to say, a democratic society, there would be no room for a centre of political conservatism such as the monarchy in Britain has always occupied. Ms Brunt makes much of the personal qualities of some members of the present monarchy, and offers the comparison with Mrs Thatcher, but the comparison is trivial and, in political terms, marginal. It is a somewhat elementary point to suggest that what matters in society is who has the power and who determines policy. As Disraeli told Hyndman in the spring of 1881, England 'is a very difficult country to move', and the conservatism to which Disraeli was referring has always been assisted and nourished by the existence of the monarchy.

The book pages are not at all helpful to many of the novitiates who service *MT*'s editorial needs. There was an advertisement in the January 1988 issue of *Marxism Today* from the Journeyman Press. They were advertising *The Murals of Diego Rivera* at £12.95, and they added the comment: 'Just one of Journeyman's many feminist and socialist books not reviewed or mentioned by *Marxism Today* in the last twelve years'. It was a fair criticism. The book pages of *Marxism Today* do not rank as among the journal's chief glories. Marxism, in its many forms – and deformations – has always accepted intellectual debate and discussion. In its political meetings the platform has always reminded the audience of the bookstall at the back of the room. But for *Marxism Today* books are obviously not important. The numbers of books noticed are few; the level of reviewing is indifferent; and, as would be expected, there is almost no coverage of historical subjects. Occasionally there are useful things: a page on Virago's celebration of 15 years of publishing (July); another on Kagarlitsky in the month following; and a page of short notices of books on South Africa and Apartheid (June). It is, however, not only the regrettably little space allocated to book reviews, **but** *MT*'s usual political promiscuity. In October they again showed their fascination with the Tories by asking Jeffrey Archer what his reading habits were. In three columns, and the slop per inch was as could have been predicted. JEFFREY ARCHER! . . . in the section of the journal headed CULTURE. Just as unfortunate was the full page review, in the same issue as the unspeakable Archer, of the Kray brothers. The reviewer was Jimmy Boyle, an interesting personality who however is quite incapable of writing anything but an anecdotal account. *Marxism Today* must have a special line

to the Krays because in February 1989 they published a memoir written by Reg Kray of a young 18 year old murderer who was hanged. It took one and a half pages of the journal and was also included in the 'Culture' section.

The October 1988 issue of MT was largely devoted to a discussion of New Times, the centrepiece of all the editorial **discussions** and approaches. Much of it was similar to the Communist Party discussion document Facing Up to the Future which was published in the September issue. In the following month there was first a letter from **Ernesto Laclau** extolling the **document** as 'a major breakthrough in the political strategy of the British **Left**' and a second letter from three signatories to the document who explained that they had not seen the final draft with which they had '**substantial** disagreements'<sup>1</sup>. They went on to make the point that there was no link between the analysis and any strategy of advance towards socialism. And that was the last MT readers heard about these political differences since apparently it had already been agreed that the political debate around the document should be carried on in the CP weekly, 7 Days. Reasonable, no doubt, given **MT's** aversion to serious political discussion. The method so often used by MT, the round table discussion, tends to superficiality and cosiness.

The matter of New Times has not been absent from the British labour movement in the past, and indeed there are certain striking similarities to the period of the **1950s**. But both the leadership of Labour and the intellectuals of the movement have often had difficulty in coming to **terms** with improving living standards. It was a constant theme of the lib-lab trade unionists at the end of the 19th century. They were always **looking** back at their early days, when the levels of exploitation were so brutally apparent and when living standards were so precarious, and contrasting those times with their present position. It all helped to encourage and extend the conservative character of the Labour leadership down to the first World War. There was little of that nostalgia during the interwar years, but with World War **II** and the election of a Labour government, against a background of full employment, it was now the turn of the Labour Party's intellectuals to proclaim the advent of New Times. They actually believed, and explained, the social revolution which had come about as a result of income redistribution, the introduction of a range of welfare benefits, and what they believed to be the state's responsibility for full employment. What Tony Crosland called 'The Transition from Capitalism' was the theme of a series of articles published in New Fabian Essays in 1952. Crosland repeated the arguments, although not quite in their earlier stark illiteracy, in his major work The Future of Socialism which first appeared in 1956; and even in the 1962 edition he was arguing that considerable income redistribution had taken place, and that he would still be prepared to argue that we were no longer living in a capitalist society. By this time, it should be added, Richard **Titmuss**, among others, had already demolished the Crosland arguments concerning income distribution and the ownership of wealth."

We now have another group of intellectuals who are telling us about the

New Times we are currently living in, their importance to the Thatcherite hegemony, and the much needed changes in the Left's political strategies to match the rapidly changing situation. There is certainly no doubt about the rapidity of change, but the fact that we are supposed to be living, or moving into, the post-Fordist era, says nothing about the ownership of wealth, the distribution of income, or the relationship between economic power and political control. On these matters the New Times advocates are notably hazy. It has been emphasised above that the directors of *Marxism Today* have completely misread the political economy of the Thatcher years. Much less has been said about the absence of an effective political opposition during the whole decade of Thatcherism, but it has been a material fact of the greatest importance, since does it not have consequences for the supposedly successful hegemony of the Thatcher project? And it is not only the economic history of the Thatcher years which has been misunderstood, so have the social consequences. Poverty is not a subject often discussed in *Marxism Today*, and it is difficult to know why this has been so. New Timers are always sensitive to changes around them; they are always **looking** for the areas of growth in society, and are never backward in chiding the Left upon its tendency **to** remain rooted in a conservative past. Now today poverty is a growth area and as such ought surely to have engaged the attention of the editorial team of *Marxism Today* in their search for what is new and developing. Since 1975 the number of poor people in Britain has risen by more than three million. In the years 1973-77 Britain ranked second in the poverty table of 12 EC countries, with one nation only having a lower proportion of poor. By 1984-5 Britain had fallen to sixth place, with Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany and Italy all with lower proportions than Britain. The definition of 'poor' were those with less than half the average equivalent disposable income of their own country, and the figures are therefore a guide to growing income inequalities as much as a sign of absolute poverty; and on these figures poverty between the dates indicated has grown more sharply in Britain than anywhere else except Ireland (The figures quoted were prepared for the European Commission and leaked to Gordon Brown, of the Labour Shadow Cabinet).

The trouble with the New Times people is that they cannot get away from the consumer society, and their horizons are bounded by words like choice, individualism, increased individual responsibility, flexibility, and the like. As with the Crosland revisionists of the 1950s, it does not apparently seem credible that if individuals and families have improved living standards their ideas do not necessarily have to regress into petty bourgeois modes of **thinking**. On the contrary: the radical sections of advanced capitalist societies in the 20th century have often come from the better paid workers among the working class as a whole, and there is no reason whatsoever why the relatively modest economic improvements of the past decades should be accompanied by a slide into conservative attitudes. There must, of course,

be a vigorous political and intellectual centre of opposition, and this has certainly been absent in recent years: to which, it may be added, Marxism Today has unfortunately made its own special contribution. For what has been missing is the projection of the **kind** of society that produces both choice and justice; that offers the vision of a country that puts the education of its young people at the centre of its purposes; that provides for the welfare of its disadvantaged and disabled as a major responsibility; that restores and maintains working practices and conditions of work independent of the ravages of the free market; that decentralises power and breaks down the pervasive authoritarianism that has developed so strongly these past ten years: not a socialist society, for that is not on the immediate agenda, but the first beginnings of something better.

In the meantime we have New Times: after ten years of **Mrs** Thatcher, the British economy is in serious and growing trouble, with the highest inflation in western Europe, the highest interest rates and a massive balance of payments deficit; with a manufacturing output increase over the years **1973** to **1988** of **3.2** per cent, compared with **33.53** per cent for Italy, **17.5** per cent for West Germany, and **13.26** for France; with our homeless total higher than ever before at well over **100,000**; with more people in prison than in any other country of the EC, and with the worst overcrowding ever experienced; with **125** out of **338** beaches failing to meet EC standards, chiefly because of sewage pollution; with the **UK's** rate for full time education and training in the **16** to **18** age groups at **35** per cent in **1988**, compared with **79** per cent in the US, and **77** per cent in Japan, Holland and Belgium.

This is only the beginning of a catalogue of economic and social ills that are pushing Britain downwards in the hierarchy of second class world powers. We already occupy around the seventeenth place in the world league of gross domestic product per head; and if present world trends continue, we shall continue to move down. If Galbraith's private affluence is limited to a minority of the British people, public squalor has been a rapidly growing feature of the British urban environment during the Thatcher years. Much more serious is the public corruption in high places that has been such a striking characteristic of this past decade. Westland, Gibraltar, the Stalker affair, the financial gerrymandering to encourage the processes of privatisation, the lies that **government** ministers are constantly telling each other, Parliament, and the European Commission: known about mostly because of the constant leaks from Whitehall by civil servants who cannot stomach the level of duplicity that is now common practice. And in the business and financial worlds fraud and deception are the staple of the daily lives of those who exist by making money breed more money. We are members of a society in which there are growing tumours of decadence. New Times indeed; and why, in this new found era, cannot a new title be discovered for a journal that is seriously misinforming its readers as to its contents?

A close reading of these twelve issues of 1988 **has** been an exceedingly dispiriting experience. We already know that when historians come to look back upon the 1980s the most striking political fact will have been the absence of a serious opposition at Westminster and in the country at large. A political opposition can only come about with an informed, relevant and sharply critical approach to the dominant ideas and policies of those in power, and to those who uphold them. An opposition must be constantly probing and denouncing. All political movements of the Left must be able to rely upon their writers and intellectuals to provide interpretations and judgements that will come together to **form** a coherent programme: one which not only provides the basis for continuous attack but which offers constant encouragement to its own supporters. *Marxism Today* is described on its front page as the theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party; and the intellectual feebleness and absence of a steadfastly critical approach must have some relationship with the continued decline of the Communist Party as a political force. No one who read *Marxism Today* in 1988 would have become enthused and excited about political activity. At its best, occasionally, *Marxism Today* was interesting; too often it was wordy, **dull** and not interesting. Above all the absence of political debate left a very large hole in what purports to be a theoretical discussion journal of the Left. If it continues in the grooves of 1988, this is not a journal for the politically committed: what is needed is more debate, more discussion, and a social exploration that is not bound by the shallow and superficial trivia known as New Times.

#### NOTES

1. I wish to make it clear that this article was planned in the closing months of 1988, and written during **November/December** 1989. As the text makes plain, it is essentially a study of the twelve issues of 1988, and it does not purport to register the changes over time which editorial policy may have initiated. In particular, there are some contributors over the years since Martin Jacques became editor whose theoretical approach has been important for the development of the journal, but whose approach has not been analysed in this present article since they wrote only occasionally during 1988. I refer especially to Eric Hobsbawm and Bea Campbell.
2. MT, October 1988, p. 25.
3. *The Hard Road to Renewal. Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (Verso, 1988)
4. *New Statesman and Society*, 7 July 1989, pp. 32–5.
5. For a brief introduction, with bibliography of some of the leading items, see John Saville, 'May Day 1937', in *Essays in Labour History, 1918–1939* (ed. Briggs and Saville, 1977) p. 252. Public opinion forced the National government in 1935 to set up a Royal Commission on the Private Manufacture of **Arms**.
6. *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 14.
7. The commentators who were most consistent during the **1980s** for their critical understanding of the political economy of the Thatcher government included Wynne **Godley**, professor of applied economics at Cambridge; Victor Keegam

of the *Guardian*; Christopher **Huhne** of the same paper; William Keegan of the *Observer*. I have been especially indebted to the writings of William Keegan for the analysis developed in this article.

8. The literature on Britain's **economic** decline relative to the rest of the **industrialised** world is now voluminous. For a succinct **account**, Sir **Alec Cairneross**, 'Britain's industrial decline', *Royal Bank of Scotland Review*, No **159** (September **1988**) pp. 3-18.
9. **Wynne Godley**, 'A growth in the heart of the ewnomy', *Observer*, 7 August **1989**; Will **Hutton** and J. Story, 'The Slide to Skid Row', *New Statesman and Society*, 13 October **1989**, pp. 12-13.
10. The report is discussed by its chairman, Lord **Aldington**, 'Britain's Manufacturing Industry', *Royal Bank of Scotland Review*, No **151** (September **1988**) pp. 3-13.
11. **All** the data on tax and benefits are taken from the remarkable analysis by John Hills, *Changing Tax. How the Tax System Works and how to change it - 64pp*. The booklet, which is a very detailed **account** of the tax system in the past decade, is published by the Child Poverty Action Group (**1988**) and is an indispensable guide to the ways in which the burden of taxation has been steadily shifted from the well-off to the less well-off.
12. 'A French bastard landing with an **armed banditti** and establishing himself King of England, against the wnsent of the natives, is, in plain **terms**, a very paltry, rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity . . . The plain truth is that the antiquity of English monarchy will not bear looking into' *Common Sense* (**1776**).
13. There is a discussion of the post-war Labour Party New Ties' thinkers of the **1950s** in John **Saville**, 'Labour and Inwme Re-distribution', *Socialist Register* (**1965**) pp. 147-162.