

WILLIAM WALTERS

Groovy Times

New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s
Edited by Stuart Hall and Jacques Martin

London: Verso, 1990.

New Times is the rather unimaginative rubric under which these essays gather various social developments elsewhere associated with post-industrialism, post-modernism, post-Fordism and the so-called revolution of the subject. Most of the articles, many first published in the British Communist Party's monthly, *Marxism Today*, take as their base-line an epochal shift from a characteristically Fordist society to one that is post-Fordist. In the introduction editors Hall and Martin inform us that the world has changed not just incrementally but qualitatively; Britain and other advanced capitalist countries are increasingly characterized by diversity, differentiation and fragmentation whereas under Fordism homogeneity, standardization and the economies and organizations of scale were the rule.

New Times is also about Thatcherism. Hall and Jacques' previous collection – *Politics of Thatcherism* – was mostly about its coming to power. *New Times* sets out to explain why it has been a resilient political force once in power. Throughout, Thatcherism's success is attributed to its superior understanding of the changes that distinguish New Times and its ability to take credit for them. Much more than the Left, the Thatcherite right has been alert to popular dissatisfactions with the monotony and stratification of everyday life under Fordism.

Robin Murray's two essays develop this theme. He claims that Britain has an emerging culture of post-Fordism. But it is not put in place instrumentally by Thatcherism, nor is it reducible to economic restructuring. Instead, he sees post-Fordism as a contradictory, partially open cultural formation. Its genealogy must take in the proliferation of resistances to Fordist bureaucracy and homogeneity which flowered after 1968. If post-Fordism is closely associated with Thatcherism, this is because the right has been good at

recuperating aspects of local alternatives to Fordism, at colonizing resistances to it. Hence, as Murray indicates, "counter-cultural" organizational forms – networks, work-place democracy, cooperatives – are echoed in contemporary managerial strategies.

That *New Times* is not so much invented as organized by the right to its advantage is a constant refrain of this book. So is the related point that any viable socialist alternative to Thatcher-ism must also be situated on the terrain of New Times. For Murray, this means developing alternatives to the semi-authoritarian modes of administration and planning which the left inherited from Fordism (and for which Thatcherism's alternative is privatization). Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (Murray's former employer) was suggestive in this respect. It demonstrated that a socialist administration could relate to civil society in a way that empowered existing producer, consumer and welfare

networks and groups. By funding social movements and self-help organizations – thus de-centring its operations – the state can enable a diverse and participatory political culture. Hitherto, social democracy has more often disabled the constituencies it claims to represent.

New Times witnesses the further elevation of a culture of popular consumption. Here again Thatcherism has made most of the running. Hall and Frank Mort argue that until it was derailed by unaddressed weaknesses in the British economy, Thatcherism's brand of economic populism won it widespread support. The Thatcher government's facilitation of consumer credit, and its cut-price sales of public housing and shares in public industries encouraged the popular association of Thatcherite economics with various pleasurable experiences of consumption.

By playing consumption as a trump card, albeit regressively equating political and cultural freedom with private pur-



R

REVIEWS

HI

ow are we to read the
Legoland aesthetic of the
shopping mall, its contents
or the experience of
shopping in it?



chasing
histori
more b
tion. F
an alm
tions o
ingrain
motiva
tion as
doubts
centur
the lan
ever co
terrain
so in l
of the
recogn
itics of
studies
have a
compl
recogn
ally fo
consum
and th
action
left for
culture
Acco
mous
relates
cation
wome
equate
economi
disting
these s
Never
often i
practic
they e
pandin
their e
and se
of mic
democ
New
for ext
cratic
tion of
over th
left. Re
at state
ciencie
procla
But on
tain to
the ma
better,
expans
subver
advoca
choic
lective
for the
panied
sphere
areas o
cial m
Not
have c
ventio

chasing power, Thatcherism exposed an historic weakness on the British left, and more broadly within the Marxist tradition. For both have been characterized by an almost exclusive concern with questions of production as well as a deeply ingrained and sometimes puritanically motivated suspicion of popular consumption as "diversion from the cause." Hall doubts that socialism will start the next century unless it manages to connect with the landscapes of popular pleasure, however contradictory and commodified a terrain they represent. This is particularly so in light of what he calls the "revolution of the subject," or what Rosalind Brunt recognizes as the emergence of a new politics of identity. Poststructuralism, cultural studies and certain strains of feminism have all emphasized the fragmented, incomplete and plural nature of the self. To recognize that subjectivities are provisionally formed through everyday processes of consumption — as well as production — and that desire is a legitimate basis for action, is then to broaden a space on the left for treating consumption and popular culture politically and strategically.

Accordingly Hall points to an "enormous expansion" of civil society that he relates to the multiplication and diversification of social worlds in which men and women now operate. Like Foucault, he equates these micro-worlds with different economies of pleasure, each possessing distinct codes. Frequently, he admits, these sites get thoroughly commodified. Nevertheless, these micro-worlds are often imaginatively created through the practices that make up popular culture; they entail ordinary people actively expanding the identities available to them in their everyday working, social, familial and sexual lives. As such, the proliferation of micro-worlds is a potentially democratic experience.

New Times' political project calls in part for extending and deepening the democratic promise held out by the pluralization of civil society. This involves winning over the tendencies of *New Times* to the left. Responding to widespread annoyance at state intrusions and public sector deficiencies, Thatcherism struck a chord by proclaiming the merits of individualism. But only in a limited sense: as they pertain to property owners and consumers in the market. According to Charlie Leadbetter, the left needs to respond with an expansive vision of individualism. It can subvert Thatcherism by re-inscribing its advocacy of self-reliance and individual choice with the insistence that only collective provision can realize these goods for the vast majority. This must be accompanied by the call to extend and multiply spheres of rights in recognition of the new areas of the political exposed by new social movements.

Not surprisingly, *New Times'* themes have come under attack from more conventional quarters. For orthodox Marxism,

Thatcherism is ample evidence that class struggle is alive and literally kicking. Moreover, certain left-wing intellectuals would do well to put aside their esoteric concerns and get on with the job in hand: namely, organizing and educating the working class. This argument is particularly attractive to the faithful since it suggests that leftist intellectuals' purported eschewal of the cause is in part responsible for the proletariat's stubborn refusal to become the political force that Marxists know it can be.

As a political strategy and as a means of theorizing, orthodoxy often works with what I call a logic of displacement: "our" truth will expose bourgeois obfuscation, "our" rationality will replace capitalist irrationality, genuine socialist democracy will displace sham bourgeois democracy, and so on. In his critique of the *New Times* line, Mike Rustin boldly asserts that "consumption is no moral substitute for the values and experience of production: for socialists there has to be more to life than shopping, enjoyable as this on occasion may be." Production stands for the real world, "shopping" a pleasurable diversion.

But *New Times* does not posit "shopping" — nor for that matter consumption — as an alternative to production as an anthropological grounding for its politics. As critique, *New Times* performs a quite different operation from that of one-to-one displacement. It sees a more plausible foundation for a popular and progressive politics in Britain because it takes as its operative principles recuperation and rearticulation. Learning from Thatcherism, it begins with certain culturally embedded popular aspirations and works them in terms of their tensions and contradictions. These cultural elements are not so much replaced as recuperated from the existing cultural formations for broader critical projects. Numerous foci for popular politics can be generated in this way. Dick Hebdige refers in this respect to the need for a "sociology of aspirations" that might reconcile plural desires with socialist first principles of equality, social justice and social welfare.

That said, all too often the essays in *New Times* don't explore concrete openings for recuperative politics in much detail. For instance, what of the possibilities for progressive mobilization around football in Britain? Thatcherism deployed the "football supporter" for purposes of social control. Now, with the establishment of the Football Supporters Association (whose rallying cry is "reclaim the game!"), and myriad grassroots fanzines expressing supporters' intuitions and experiences of the contradictions between the game and the commodity, "football" potentially condenses a local critique of the commodification of culture.

But if *New Times* has largely broken with the conventional critical strategies of orthodox Marxism, it retains the latter's holistic understanding of history. Fordism

and post-Fordism are not only distinct epochs, but appear to be systems embodying respective meta-logics. Every social feature is then inscribed with the "logic of the system." This leads *New Times* to overstate the break between the present and the past, obscuring significant continuities. Now, I would grant that Corbuserian housing projects and Liesian governmental offices eloquently herald Fordism as the apogee of modernity. But how are we to read the Legoland aesthetic of the shopping mall, its contents or the experience of shopping in it? Do they announce that we have left behind the boring old homogeneity of Fordism/modernism — as *New Times* seems to think? Or does mall culture not symbolize more accurately a different sort of serial sameness, at best a shallow, market-bounded diversity? To come at the problem from the other direction: while there has been a proliferation of political and social identities in the last 20 years, were they really restricted to stable class identities in the post-war period? That we recognize the plurality and unfixity of political subjectivities now has as much to do with epistemological as it does sociological change.

New Times has been over-zealous in its adoption of the post-Fordism theoretical paradigm. While post-Fordism may offer a useful heuristic handle on change as well as an antidote to the platitude "It's still capitalism," it threatens to blot out historical specificity. This is most evident in the book's treatment of the British economy. *New Times* has taken Fordism and post-Fordism to be universal stages of Western capitalism and applied them to an economy that was arguably neither. Britain was never conventionally Fordist: much of its industry was not vertically or horizontally integrated, the production process was only tardily and unevenly Taylorized, its domestic markets were highly permeable, and the state's powers of intervention restricted. Likewise, Thatcherism has not prepared Britain for a post-Fordist future: its manufacturing is now a basket case, performance in high-tech export sectors is poor and inadequately coordinated by the state, and schemes for re-training and broadening workforce skills are virtually non-existent.

Thatcherism has since collapsed under the weight of its economic failings whereas *New Times* gave it the veneer of something more permanent. With unemployment climbing back towards three million *New Times* are looking a lot like old times. Nevertheless, many of the cultural changes *New Times* identifies are deep-seated; Labour could do more than win the next election if it would start to read culture politically. ♦

William Walters is a graduate student in Political Science at York University.