

Interview by Louise Connor

# Behind Marxism Today: Martin Jacques Interview

If there is a flagship of the new left in Britain it is *Marxism Today*, variously described as the "theoretical and discussion journal" of the Communist Party and as "politics with style". With a wide variety of contributors writing on issues ranging from economics to the politics of pop and fashion, this monthly magazine has attracted a readership of over 14,000 people. Louise Connor recently interviewed Martin Jacques, the editor of *Marxism Today*, who was chiefly responsible for this fresh approach to politics, about the ideas behind the magazine and some of the contentious issues for the left in Britain.

*Marxism Today could be described as the flagship of the new left. Can you explain how the new left differs from the old and what are the hallmarks of Marxism Today?*

*Marxism Today* has combined three major characteristics. Firstly, it took the Gramscian revolution in Britain in the 1970s to heart. It coupled that with the Eurocommunist debates and treated them as a major point of departure from previous communist traditions. There were lines of continuity, but that was certainly a very important moment.

*On that point, what was the major difference between the old and new left?*

I would say the major issue is the notion of hegemony: accepting that the political strategy you must develop for your country and society rests on the capacity of the working class to win, through a process of consent, allies throughout society. The processes of political change are therefore no longer apocalyptic or catastrophic, but are of a more prolonged character. A lot of the traditional notions of the nature of a revolution and the difference between capitalism and socialism, a lot of the hard and fast categories, and the simplistic way they were presented previously began to evaporate. This is all obviously leading into a more complex era with all kinds of difficulties as well as possibilities.

The second point of departure for *Marxism Today* was a preparedness, by the late 'seventies, to come to terms with what was happening in politics both at home and overseas. In practice, this meant confronting Thatcherism and the crisis of the labour movement. These two themes became the hallmarks of the *Marxism Today* approach to analysing the present political phase. It was that confrontation with reality that set *Marxism Today* apart from virtually everything else on the left.

No one else was prepared, at that stage, to say that Thatcherism represents a completely new kind of Toryism and the left cannot keep on fighting in the same ways it fought the old Toryism, otherwise it must fail.

No one else was arguing the question of the crisis of the left. The common wisdom on the left was that we were advancing, not retreating. Add to that *Marxism Today's* willingness to confront the move out of the long boom and into recession, and the profound material and ideological changes which that has engendered ... the move into a completely new environment.

The third characteristic is, in some ways, the most unusual and, in others, the most important. We attempt to analyse what is actually happening by assimilating or dialoguing with more or less anything that is actually going on in society. Most communist magazines sell primarily within the organisation. A language has grown up within the communist movement that's essentially a very internal language.

*Marxism Today* set about culturally breaking out of the ghetto by tackling the issues everyone else is concerned about. We set about selling in newsagents and not just party bookshops. We went for a cover that looked like another magazine. We changed the relationship between advertising (which was virtually non-existent) and sales revenue. We set about developing an ability to have articles on Madonna as much as on the international capitalist crisis.

Much of the crisis on the left, certainly in this country, has been its isolation from society. One expression of this in Britain is its attitude to the media. The left is completely unable to come to terms with the media, either by successfully intervening and relating to the media as they are, or by establishing its own media. The two are obviously very related. If you can't understand the existing media it's not surprising that you can't produce a successful one of your own.

*There was criticism from some on the left for describing Thatcher's policies as something new, as a break with previous capitalist policies. Can you describe what you see as the essential features of Thatcherism which make it different?*



I think that the essential characteristic of Thatcherism is its objective of opposing the existing consensus which had governed all policy-making in the post-war period in Britain. The post-war social democratic consensus had been supported by all previous Tory, as well as Labour governments, in terms of support for full employment, the welfare state, recognition of trade unionism and the role of a large public sector.

Thatcher counterposed to that a new model of society in which unemployment now became a virtue and a necessity rather than an unfortunate aberration; in which the market was promoted as the central means by which society should function, the state withdrawing both in the economic and social areas in order to promote individual incentives.

In the course of that, the fundamental contours of the economic and social structure of the country, the welfare state and the public sector were to be reordered and the society in a general way was going to be Americanised. I think that's the hallmark of Thatcher.

Thatcherism represents not just a new political objective but one pursued strategically with a totally different kind of political approach than had been associated with previous Toryism. If you're going to reshape the political agenda, redraw the debate and transform the balance of political forces, you've got to go out there to hegemonise society and the forces you can mobilise for your ends. You've got to redraw the social divisions within society.

Traditionally, Toryism has appealed to certain long-term features of British society. It wasn't that Thatcher stopped appealing to those features but she also tried to appeal to sections of the working class as well on the basis

of a strong anti-trade union, anti-corporatist, pro-individualistic, pro-market, pro-patriotic banner. She did that, with some success.

### *Was the left able to gauge Thatcher's appeal?*

By and large, no. The left has been moulded by the circumstances of the post-war social democratic consensus. The modern labour movement emerged in its present position in society on the basis of it being able to impose its model of politics on society. The social democratic consensus was derived from the '45 Labour government and for thirty to forty years that has been the way of living.

When something else came along which was no longer prepared to take that consensus for granted but, on the contrary, wanted to destroy it and construct something else, the left didn't even recognise what had come along. There were very few people who would face what Thatcherism was about or even ask the questions. Some would say that Thatcherism was a worse kind of Toryism, but it's a quantitative, not a qualitative, change which they have in mind. But there are signs that there are forces on the left which, in some degree or another, recognise that Thatcherism is different, but which embody different responses.

The miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, for example, recognised that Thatcherism was something different but didn't understand the key elements and simply thought that Thatcherism was about fighting a war of manoeuvre. Scargill fought a war of movement thinking that the miners were about to defeat the government which, in practice, would have created a great crisis of political authority.

But that wasn't what Thatcher was on about. He misinterpreted her strong leadership as coinciding with a war of movement. But Thatcher knows when she's going to fight, when she's not, and when to retreat. Thatcher chooses the ground on which to fight from time to time.

Then there are people on the local government side like Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Council, and Sheffield Council's David Blunkett. They have certainly displayed an ability to appeal outside traditional constituencies and mobilise new reserves of support for the left, particularly on the democratic demand of the defence of local government. They have shown a capacity to use new language, new symbols, and there has been a modernism about their campaigns. So, whether or not they completely understand what Thatcherism is all about, there is no question that they have responded successfully to some of the changes that Thatcherism represents.

### *On issues like state ownership, Thatcher has been able to appeal to people's unfavourable perceptions of the state. How does the left incorporate these into a new strategy?*

I should like to make a distinction between Thatcher's success on the issue of nationalisation and public ownership and her problems in handling the welfare state. On the latter issue, the left has managed, to one degree or another, to establish a certain line beyond which it is very difficult for the Tories to advance. That line began to register around the National Health Service in the course of the last general election. Although the Tories would like

to cut much further into the welfare state, they would actually like to restructure it and begin to privatise it in a more profound way. They are finding it extremely difficult.

Public ownership is a different matter. A lot of industry that was publicly owned has now been privatised — sometimes, like British Telecom, with a lot of public support.

Opinion polls on public ownership show that it remains very unpopular. Among conservatives that is to be expected, but it is true of Alliance supporters and it is also true of Labour supporters. There are a number of issues entangled in the public's feelings about nationalisation.

The first is that the tradition of nationalisation has made people feel that they have less control than they have ever had over other forms of industry. The model of nationalisation which has been used here has been very bureaucratic and unresponsive to either the workforce within the firm or to public opinion more generally. This is probably a feature of nationalisation in other countries as well.

Secondly, the other problem is that this form of nationalisation is particularly associated with an ideology of nationalising the "commanding heights". It is associated with a certain technological era in which you tackled the problem of public control by going for the big industries.

It also happened that, by and large, they went for the big industries, apart from the public utilities which were relatively unsuccessful, such as coal, the railways, and so on. It was difficult from the word go because it was difficult by normal cost analysis to make them run at a profit.

In learning the lessons for the future, we are helped by certain material changes. The size of the unit of the scale of production in western economies is falling. Economies of scale — the Fordist production model — are no longer so dominant, so other forms of intervention are technically aided as well as politically desirable.

There are certain things, like the electricity and gas utilities, which should essentially remain in public ownership. But it must be a different form of nationalisation in which these institutions are very much more accessible to public pressure and demand. Perhaps they are broken up and each unit in different areas is run differently. I'm sure there are ways along those lines to decentralise.

But, alongside that, many other forms of public ownership, control, or involvement or co-operative production must develop. One of the interesting things to come from municipal governments is the way they have sought to encourage co-operatives and municipal forms of control and involvement.

*That leads us on to talking about the crisis of the labour movement because, in many ways, new forms of organising are in conflict with the old corporatist or syndicalist views of power held by sections of the left.*

One of the features of the post-war left (communists and social democrats share certain characteristics) is statism — a preoccupation with the role of central government and centrally or nationally controlled institutions, and the need for them to act on behalf of people.

Perhaps a feature of the new left, or the way that the left



as a whole needs to renew itself, is that it is much more centrally for civil society, for the growth of voluntary, popular institutions. I'm not just talking about political, or obviously progressive social institutions. We must stand for the growth of people organising themselves in whatever ways they want to improve and enhance cultural and economic activities in society.

The left's new perspective must include the construction of a new relationship and equilibrium between the state and civil society in which part of the role of central government is to enable local institutions and various forms of voluntary organisations to exist by providing funding and so on.

There are various dangers and traps in this idea and we shouldn't be utopian. But this is a way by which we can elaborate on new forms of public control and intervention which are essentially accessible and could be popular.

*Surely there is criticism in what you are saying of the way the labour movement organises itself. It is often rigidly organised and very hierarchical. Thatcher has been on the rampage against the unions and she is obviously hitting some chords with members of unions. What do you see as urgent short-term changes for the labour movement in Britain?*

It is not only what the labour movement stood for which is out of time, but also its structures and modes of operation. One example is that the trade union movement, in terms of its structures, remains extremely male, even though about a third of the movement is female. At the Trades Union Congress this year, the vast majority of

delegates were men and, nationally, there are very few prominent women trade unionists.

Unless the labour movement takes this question seriously at all levels, there is no way it can make an appeal which has any real claim in being progressive to modern society. Unless it is "feminised", in the sense that there are large numbers of women involved and the movement then reflects their concerns, priorities and gender, there is no sense in which that appeal can be achieved. The problem is that the labour movement has proved to be extremely resistant to those kind of changes.

Another area is the issue of democracy over which Thatcher has taken the trade union movement to the cleaners. It has been a very popular issue within the unions themselves and that is why, in one way or another, they have been forced to retreat. That is why they haven't been able to cope with the legislation about union democracy and elections.

The sooner the unions get on with saying that they are going to elect all their officials and executives, the better. We should stand absolutely for union elections without ducking the issue and we shouldn't have allowed the Tories to call the tune.

Let me think aloud about a third area. Labour movement structures are very internalised and shut off from society. Somehow or another, they need to make themselves accessible and attractive. How can the movement influence a society with which it is out of touch? If it is out of touch, the movement is bound to represent disproportionately the old rather than the new.

***Let's talk briefly about the miners' strike. There was criticism of Marxism Today for undertaking an analysis of the strike. What are your criticisms of the way in which the strike was carried out?***

On the issue of the criticism of *Marxism Today*, my regret about the magazine's response to the miners' strike is that we only managed to discuss these issues at the end.

***Why was that?***

It's difficult to describe to you the atmosphere that existed during the course of the miners' strike. The miners have a deep emotional meaning for the British labour movement and so it was felt that anything which questioned in any way the strategy that was being pursued by the miners, for example, the lack of a ballot or whether the argument about economic pits was correct, was not being loyal to the miners and detracting from their struggle.

An atmosphere was created in which it was extremely difficult to make these kind of points. It was difficult enough when the strike ended. I don't think such an atmosphere is healthy for the left. It prevents the left from engaging in collective thought and appraisal about what they're doing when they are acting. It encourages mindless, rather than thoughtful, militancy.

In terms of the strike itself, the main weakness was that it was informed from the outset by a notion that the miners united on their own could defeat the National Coal Board and could defeat the government in the course of doing that. In presenting it like that a number of things were ignored.

Firstly, the fact that the miners were unlikely to be united on the issue. Once it became clear that they weren't, the strategy of coercing those miners who didn't agree was pursued. This had very damaging long-term consequences.

Secondly, the importance of winning all the miners was underplayed by the failure to hold a ballot. There was no question that the no ballot decision undermined the legitimacy of the strike, among both the miners and the public.

***So you don't accept the argument that I've heard from miners that to hold a ballot on other people's jobs is unfair?***

They're two different issues. If that is true, it is also very dangerous to try to picket out all those miners who don't want to go on strike because they don't believe in it.

But it's not just a moral argument, it's political. If there had been a ballot and it had been won, the legitimacy of the strike would have been much greater in the eyes of all the members of the NUM and in the minds of other trade unionists and the public. Once they didn't, there were a lot of problems.

The NUM has a very long democratic tradition of balloting for leaders and on strike action, so this was against the normal traditions. I don't think a ballot would have been won at the start because it is very difficult to get a strike on jobs since not everyone is threatened. When it is a wage struggle everyone generally has the prospect of an increase.

But you can't have effective industrial action on jobs unless you have the unity of all the miners. If only those affected go on strike, you won't win.

Can I say just one other thing about the NUM strategy. It was informed by a politics which was essentially 1970s. It was pre-Thatcherism and pre-recession, and Scargill thought they could stage a rerun of the 'seventies. It was syndicalism in action.

The miners are the leading section of the working class. So, the first thing to do was to try to get all the miners out. They couldn't achieve that because the issue was different — jobs, not wages. The circumstances were different, the politics were different. Secondly, once the miners were out, then essential class interest and class solidarity would operate. It didn't operate. There was no way it was going to operate. That was clear right from the beginning.

Instead of having a view of a struggle as having to win people's consent, both your own membership's and those outside, there were attempts to coerce, to appeal to loyalties and so forth which just weren't there any more because of the new atmosphere created by unemployment and Thatcherism.

***There is now, in Britain, an alternative miners' union; there are a couple of renegade rightwing unions which are challenging the Trades Union Congress' authority overaccepting funds from Thatcher to run ballots on political funds. There is some discussion by these unions of organising an alternative trade union centre.***

*Continued page 32.*

methods of work, including non-manipulative relations with other organisations and respect for their autonomy, \* fostering of a broad understanding of the overall social political situation, of its separate components and of their inter-relations.

**I** further believe that such tasks cannot be adequately performed by socialist groups which now exist even should the desired co-operation between them develop, nor by the Labor Party. Attitudes to, and relations with, the Labor Party is a subject in itself, but the main points are set out in the decision of the CPA Special Congress in November 1984:

*Socialists in the ALP are only too well aware of the restrictions they face inside the ALP and the problems of an essentially electoralist party*

*Socialist advances can only be democratically achieved if there is widespread support for socialist alternatives. To do this we need a party which provides a focus for socialists to develop a strategy to build this support in every sphere of social and political life.*

*Socialists in the ALP are in an invidious position. By seeking to change the ALP into a socialist party they risk retaliation from rightwing and conservative forces in and out of the party, and thereby, in the absence of developed mass support for their positions, they risk electoral disaster for their party. No socialist can ignore the fact that a large majority of workers and ALP voters do not currently favour socialist options. This makes the development of extra-parliamentary mass movements the key to creating new possibilities for change and to developing mass support for more far-reaching changes*

*For these and other reasons, only an independent socialist party can begin to build support for socialist alternatives without threatening the electoral viability of the ALP and a return to the reactionary climate engendered by conservative governments.*

The form which a new "party" would take, and the actual steps which might bring it into existence, cannot be decided by any individual or group, or decided in advance.

They will emerge, if the possibilities actually exist, as I think they do, from practical co-operation and discussion among all who believe that socialist renewal is a central need of our time.

**Eric Aarons has been secretary of the Communist Party of Australia, and spends his spare time sculpting.**

**Behind Marxism Today continued.**

We are in a very dangerous situation because, for the first time this century, the existence of the unitary trade union movement in Britain is under challenge. If there is one thing the left must protect and fight for it is a unitary trade union movement. If that is destroyed, then with it goes much of the effectiveness of trade unionism and with it goes the modern Labour Party. I think the stakes are more or less as high as that.

There are two sets of forces which are making waves in the trade union movement at the moment. There is the right who would be quite happy to see a new kind of trade union centre. They see it as a new, collaborationist trade unionism based largely on no strike deals of one degree or another. But also, a section of the left, the hard left in particular, has persistently and completely either ignored or underestimated the importance of maintaining a single trade union centre. They felt that the issues of principle have priority over all else.

The sensible left position is to start with the principle that we must maintain a unitary trade union movement even if that means that the TUC is united around only a very low lowest common denominator. But better that than the alternative which will be two centres organising probably less than would a single centre.

**Louise Connor is the national organiser of the CPA, and a member of the Melbourne A.I.R. collective.**

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