

# The POST-FORD Pill

*In our last issue Barry Hindess took issue with John Mathews' blueprint for a democratic post-Fordist future. Democracy, he argued, was not enough. Here, John Mathews responds with a vision for the Left after the death of Communism.*

**A** hundred years into the socialist project, it is time to take stock of what has been achieved, and what can be done in the future. We live in exciting times. We have seen the collapse of the hated regimes in Eastern Europe, which called themselves socialist but in reality blocked any possible advance, in Europe or elsewhere, towards worthwhile social emancipation. Questions of the most fundamental character now have to be asked in these countries: who is to own their productive apparatus, and develop new industries? What kind of social security or welfare system is to be constructed? How can markets be introduced without fuelling an inflation of currency, hopes or fears? What is the role of political parties and trade unions?

Meanwhile, things are stirring in the Third World and in the newly industrialised countries. The horrendous military dictatorships of Latin America have been overturned, at huge personal sacrifice by thousands of dedi-

cated militants, and murderous regimes toppled in the Philippines, South Korea and elsewhere. Even in South Africa it seems that apartheid is finally being dismantled.

An event of a different character has also signalled the end of an era. On June 4 last year, in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party showed that it had exhausted its progressive role in China, and was now an obstacle to further advance. The communist parties of Eastern Europe are seen in a similar light. The turn of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is coming. This brings down the curtain on a hundred and fifty years of political development from the 1848 revolutions in Europe, and the issuing of the *Communist Manifesto*, through the Russian Revolution and the models it inspired.

In the West we have had one hundred years of openly organised socialist political parties. The model they pursued, when elected to power, was a surrogate of social ownership of the means of production through state ownership. This, too, as a model has run its course. When Gorbachev calls for the rapid introduction of capitalism into the Soviet Union to forestall social collapse and chaos we are shocked, but we know he is right. Events are moving so fast they are outrunning our capacity to anticipate them. And it has always been the boast of the Left

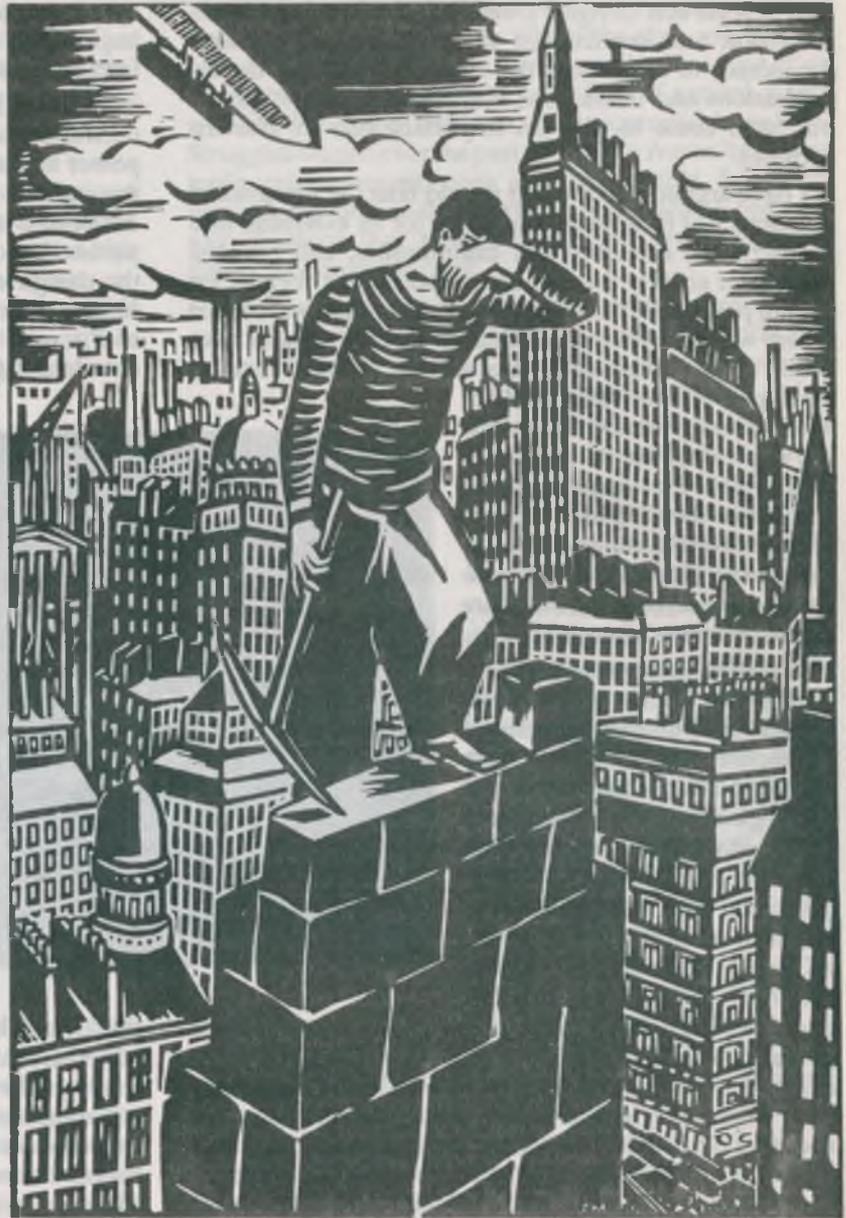
that what differentiated it from the Right was its capacity to anticipate the future. Now we are not so sure.

The debate about the future of the Left, of social democracy and of democracy itself needs to be set in this context. Barry Hindess, in his comments in last month's *ALR* on my model of "associative democracy", avoids any mention of these stirring events. He asks, provocatively, what's so good about democracy. Let me try to provide him with an answer.

There is a long preamble to Hindess' question. He has done the Left great service in the past by unmasking the delusions of socialism, insisting that socialists had to come to terms with parliamentary democracy and markets and the other institutions of modern societies. We had to come to terms, in other words, with social and political reality. This lesson has been learnt, and the Left (particularly, I would argue, in Australia) has fashioned highly effective strategies for intervening in and setting the agenda of public debate, within the constraints of what is seen to be realistic and achievable. Hindess has now taken to reflecting on more fundamental issues.

In a paper delivered to a conference in London last year he set forth what he called the "imaginary presuppositions of democracy". This time the 'fantasy' that is the object of his attention is that of citizen participation in a self-governing community. Considered as communities of citizens, he argued, they cannot be self-governing (because of external events and agencies impinging on them); considered as communities approximating to self-government, they cannot be seen as communities of citizens (because they depend on a variety of voluntary organisations such as political parties and pressure groups that cannot be equated with citizens). Hindess has linked these concerns back to socialism by pointing out firstly that there is no single principle or model allowing us to classify communities as being more or less democratic; secondly, democracy is an impossible dream if it is equated with the notion of a self-governing community of citizens; thirdly, socialism is equally unrealisable because of the contradiction that must exist between the goals of controlling the economic agenda and defending the autonomy of citizens; finally, internationalisation has consigned the idea of local self-governing communities to the historical dustbin.

Hindess has provided some trace of these arguments in the conclusion to his *ALR* piece last month. In most elliptical fashion, he put the view that the notion of democracy



"is not without ambiguity", and specified several grounds for doubting its contribution to a resolution of current concerns. In particular, he noted that it is confined to a national dimension, and hence cannot come to terms with international issues; that it fails to get to grips with gender relations and the "constitution of human beings as gendered subjects"; and that it cannot effectively address forms of "social regulation" that involve spheres such as "law, medicine and psychiatry".

Now Hindess brings these charges against democracy "as traditionally conceived". If by this he means democracy conceived merely as an electoral process involving a designated community of voters once every so

often selecting representatives who then deal with issues on their behalf, then we have no problem in agreeing with him. But the vision of democracy I have advocated goes well beyond this. In *Age of Democracy* I have argued for an extension and enrichment of our notion of political democracy to encompass the democratisation of the organisations and institutions that Hindess himself points out have come to play an important role in Western societies.

I have argued that the Left should take the promises of democracy at face value, and argue for its extension into industry, the economy and communities, using as the vehicle for activity the collective 'associations' formed for the purpose by workers and citizens. This allows us to start where we are, with the associations that we already have (trade unions, firms, social movements, political parties); and it provides us with a vision of a functioning democracy that is not dependent for its regulation on the role of the state, but sees the broader civil society as the source of its innovation and social co-ordination. How does this expanded notion of democracy fare against Hindess' charges?

1. If ever there were a sphere where the social movements (which are the protagonists of democratic 'associations') have set the pace for social reform, it is in the global sphere in the face of global challenges. Organisations like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and their local affiliates in scores of countries, including the ACF and Wilderness Society in Australia, have shown a capacity and a willingness to adopt a global posture, to form a global network, to engage in global mobilisation, while acting and intervening locally. So Hindess chose a very poor example if he was trying to demonstrate that "associative democracy" is bounded by the traditional borders of the nation state. On the contrary, these new forms of democratic expression positively favour and encourage the development of global awareness in a fashion which will become increasingly relevant and politically effective in the 1990s.

2. In the same way, one can make a case that gender relations have been transformed as a direct result of the organising activities of social movements, such as the women's movement and the gay movement, as well as by specific campaigns such as those directed to questions of abortion, rape, and child protection. In the case of AIDS, and its early toll of death in male homosexual communities, the social networks of support formed by gay activist organisations (the associations of "associative democracy") showed unprecedented social capacities of innovation and mutual support. The associative democracy framework has no problems with gender issues.

3. When Hindess talks of "forms of social regulation and surveillance involving law, medicine and psychiatry", he is no doubt alluding to the networks of control exercised by professionals that go beyond the formal constraints imposed by civil and criminal law that form part of the fabric of political democracy.

Foucault has shown successfully how pervasive these networks have become in transforming the exercise of power into a multitude of micro-environments dispersed throughout civil society. One might add to this list the constraints imposed on workers by trade unions and companies; the constraints imposed on social intercourse by the design of public technological infrastructure in the form of telecommunications, public transport, and public media; and so on. In all these cases bodies and professionals outside the direct control of parliament exercise considerable influence on the lives of ordinary citizens. Again, I have been concerned to address these issues directly with the notion of "associative democracy".

In the design of public technological systems, for example, I have argued that it is futile to expect a seventeenth century institution like parliament to have the technical capacity, even if it had the will, to regulate these developments in the public interest. Instead it is necessary to seek the expression of human and community values through associations of those directly concerned with these processes. In this case, the associations are those of workers and professionals. So again, associative

democracy has something positive to offer on this score. My vision of a social democracy that can lead societies through the next hundred years is one in which people (citizens) associate around their immediate interests, such as professional or trade concerns, community interests and moral concerns, and intervene in the polity directly through these associations. I have described what such an "associative democratic polity" might look like, and how it might work, in *Age of Democracy*.

The role of a social democratic political party in such a vision is not diminished, for it retains a monopoly as the vehicle for representation of people committed to values of social solidarity, mutuality and co-operation, in public bodies and forums (not just parliaments at national and regional level, but also public authorities and, I argue, in public corporations as well, such as BHP). But it is not seen as the sole means of expression for these values; it complements their direct expression in associations organised around specific issues or interests.

For the past hundred years most socialists have conceived social progress in terms of re-extending the regulatory capacity of the state over more and more areas

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consciousness."**

of social and economic life. The end point of this falsely conceived notion was the nightmare totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe. My vision of associative democracy is concerned to curb this tendency, to re-emphasise the innovative capacities and powers of co-ordination that emanate from associations formed by citizens in the civil society. I claim that the major political trends of our time support such a view.

In this country, for example, we can point to a new sophistication on the part of trade unions in formulating a vision of the future of Australia as a productive nation, and in negotiating directly with employers to realise this vision. Such direct associative encounters have been encouraged by the framework of the Accord. Now we see this approach being extended (albeit slowly and hesitantly) in the form of accords over such issues as logging, negotiated directly by logging industry associations, forestry unions and conservation groups. The State (in this case, the federal government) is learning to play a facilitating role in these arrangements, rather than seeking to regulate the issues itself.

I do not seek to minimise the difficulties and obstacles to be overcome in any program inspired by a vision of associative democracy. Obstacles and difficulties will confront any program of social transformation - or any program of conservatism that seeks to restrain irresponsible development instigated by private interests. It is most puzzling that Hindess foresees future social conflict in the paradigm of associative democracy, and argues that this detracts from its potential as a social order. I embrace the notion of social conflict, and see it as fundamental in any pluralist society. Conflict is absent only in a totally repressive or totalitarian social order. I seek to harness the energy and creative aspects of conflict through direct negotiations between associations. The outcome of such negotiations can't be determined in advance.

Worse, Hindess appears to assume that any expression of social interests will have to be orchestrated through a "democratically elected government". This is what he counterposes to the continued existence of "private business corporations". This is a very old and tired opposition. I have tried to move beyond it by posing a role for citizens and workers to participate actively in the expression of social values through their associations. Democratised business entities will be one such avenue. Government will not be the sole means for expression of social values or of the public interest. In an associative democracy, the 'public interest' will be expressed through a multitude of associations. Indeed, it could be defined as that 'entity' around which associations form in the first place.

I am not concerned, as Hindess believes, to 'defend' the state against the exercise of such power. On the contrary, I am concerned to protect the exercise of power on the part of associations by reducing the role of the state. And my vision of democracy is one where the state exercises its surveillance to ensure that associations function democratically according to principles of natural justice without becoming fiefdoms or unaccountable entities. Struggles waged over the past 80 years in Australia to keep trade unions honest, open and accountable, frequently through recourse to the courts, should leave no one with any illusions that associations will keep themselves democratic automatically.

Hindess argues that the link between my discussion of associative democracy, and discussion of trends and potentials in the world of production of goods and services, is problematic. He claims that there is a contradiction between advocating a 'non-substantive' democratic framework, and a desired future for industry in the form of post-Fordism. Let's investigate this.

My vision of associative democracy was developed as a means of accommodating, at the political level, the innovative kinds of strategies I saw being pursued by unions and social movements at the level of production. The old political frameworks of classical liberal democracy, on the one hand, and socialist state ownership, on the other hand, failed to accommodate these new kinds of strategic interventions. Worse,

they actively discouraged intervention at the level of production, seeing it as illegitimate. (Illegitimate from the perspective of liberal democracy in that it represented extra-parliamentary political intervention; and illegitimate from the perspective of classical socialism in that it attempted to influence production decisions other than through state ownership.)

I have sought then a political framework that would accommodate a more strategically oriented intervention by unions and social movements, lifting their sights from immediate self-interests (workers' pay packets, or a community's welfare regardless of the welfare of others) to more general concerns. In Australia I have argued that the Accord served this purpose because it encouraged strategic intervention by unions at the point of production, broadening the agenda of industrial relations and taking unions and militants off the endless treadmill of wages struggle. This cycle certainly fed inflation, but any notion that it fed a social consciousness was a delusion. I argue now that extensions of the Accord are feasible and desirable to bring in new social forces such as the conservation movement, and to bring in the employers (as

*"The end-point of state regulation was the regimes of Eastern Europe."*

achieved recently in NSW by the pact agreed between unions and employers).

Now there is a sense in which the post-Fordist agenda represents a desired or imposed substantive industrial outcome. It certainly seeks to break with the Fordist simplicities and rigidities that are part of the vision of productive efficiency associated with mass production. (For details, see my *Tools of Change*.) It seeks to enrol unions in the project of moving firms in both the production of goods and services to higher value-added activities placing a premium on quality, service and skill. I argue that this is what award restructuring is all about in Australia right now.

But there is also a sense in which post-Fordism can be seen as a project of democratisation of the workplace. If workers are given more say over their conditions and the products of their work, they will elect to move away (I presume) from boring, mechanical and repetitive tasks assigned to them in low value-added mass production, and will seek to exercise higher skills and levels of responsibility in producing more complex goods and services in a more socially responsible fashion.

This works both ways because the decision on the part of a firm to move to higher value-added production entails calling for greater commitment from a more skilled and responsible workforce which will only be forthcoming with greater direct democracy and wages linked to productivity.

Recent works by Linda Weiss and Robert Mann have revealed how the mass production system was virtually imposed through war mobilisation as a means of producing stockpiles of armaments, and of keeping workers under military discipline. This was generalised in the twentieth century through Fordism, and social democracy itself was shaped by this process. I argue that post-Fordism represents the end of the militarisation of industry and the beginning of its substantive democratisation. This is a force that must feed into social democracy, and which social democracy can harness.

I conceive of associative democracy as the extension and generalisation of the post-Fordist agenda to the whole of civil society, and not just to the firm, thereby bringing into the process wider sectors and associations than simply firms, unions and technology professionals. It is for this reason that I insist that the democratisation process must be concerned with the current wave of introduction of new technologies. It is not motivated by a desire to be seen as being "up with the latest" (as Hindess unkindly suggests) but rather by a concern that the process of democratisation be seen as relevant to current efforts to make industry more productive and place it on a new footing of skills formation and collaborative work organisation. If the Left's democratisation agenda is not relevant to this process then it is not relevant at all.

In Australia we are coming up to the centenary of the founding of the ALP. It looks as though the event will be celebrated with back-patting and nostalgic looks back into the past, to Barcaldine and Ballarat, to the diggers and the

shearers. While it is appropriate to honour the founders, it is also important to chart the future. I would suggest that the ALP Centenary would most fittingly be celebrated by the formation of a party commission to develop a long term strategy which would be put to a national conference and adopted as the guiding set of principles for the party over the next decade or more. Of course, the pragmatists will object that such a commission would be 'divisive', and that it might open up issues which are 'electorally damaging'. I have responded to such criticisms in *Age of Democracy*, where I label them 'pragmatic evasion'. No party can be called mature that avoids such long-term discussion. The German Social Democratic Party has engaged in just such an intense exercise and is now poised to dominate a reunited Germany. The Australian Labor Party has something to offer the rest of the social democratic world and the time to project its image into the future has arrived.

If we want to progress, if we want to build something marvellous in this world it has to be on the foundations of democracy. There is no other acceptable way. And this means having to live with the New Right, with the Moral Majority, with capitalists who openly sneer at democracy and goad their workers to strike at remote iron ore mines. It means having to organise in competition with them, to compete with them for space in the political arena, in the media, and ultimately in the popular imagination.

Associative democracy is advanced as a vision or paradigm that can sustain such an effort. It does not present a finished blueprint, even if such were feasible. It does not present a last word in social arrangements. It is in my view merely a first step, if we can democratise the major institutions that shape the public order, to bring them into the mainstream of public accountability. To encourage and foster these sorts of developments, the movements and tendencies that identify themselves with social democracy need a vision that is open and yet structured, like democracy itself. The future social order has to be fashioned; designs for new social institutions have to be developed; but these need to be developed within a framework that gives them their core values and structure. This is what I have in mind when talking of a new political paradigm.

It is time to break with the old models, with all their authoritarian overtones and language of class struggle. A new model or series of models fit for the next hundred years needs to be seen in terms of a clear rupture. This is what Kuhn was getting at when he talked of successive scientific paradigms, and what Perez and Freeman are getting at when they talk of successive technoeconomic paradigms. The point about a paradigm is that it provides a setting in which intellectual work can be profitably performed. We should demand of the social democratic paradigm that it deliver just such a program of intense intellectual activity, designing the political, economic, industrial and community institutions that will enable humanity to prosper for the next hundred years.

**JOHN MATHEWS** is the author of *Age of Democracy* (Collins, 1989). He teaches organisational theory at the University of NSW.