

CHANGING *the* SUBJECT

In the European left the talk is of 'New Times' — after industrialism, mass production and the mass market. Consumption and lifestyle, not production and work, have been the catchcries of the decade. Stuart Hall argues that it represents a revolution of the subjective dimension against the iron-clad certainties of the old left.

There is a good deal of talk these days about "new times". This discussion is of great political significance, for two reasons. "New times" are associated with the ascendancy of the Right in Britain, the US and many parts of Europe. But "new times" will also provide the conditions — propitious or unpropitious, depending on how we judge them — for any renewal of the Left and the project of socialism.

However, there are some real problems with this discourse of "new times". How new are they? Is it the dawn of the new age or only the whimper of an old one? How do we characterise what is "new" about them? How do we assess their contradictory tendencies? Are they progressive or regressive? What promise do they hold out for a more democratic and egalitarian future? What political meaning do they have? What are their political consequences?

So far as description is concerned, there are several terms which have been employed to characterise these transitional times. Potential candidates would include "post-industrial", "post-Fordist", "revolution of the subject", "post-modernism". None of these is wholly satisfactory. Each expresses a clearer sense of what we are leaving behind ("post") than where we are heading.

"Post-industrial" writers, like Alain Touraine and Andre Gorz, start from shifts in the technical organisation of industrial capitalist production, with its "classic" large-scale labour processes, division of labour and class conflicts. They foresee a shift to new productive regimes — with consequences for social structure and politics. Touraine has written of the replacement of older forms of class struggle by the new social movements.

"Post-Fordism" is a broader term, suggesting a whole new epoch distinct from the era of mass production. Though the debate still rages as to whether "post-Fordism" exists, most commentators would agree that it covers at least some of the following characteristics: a shift to the new "information technologies"; more flexible, decentralised forms of labour process and work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the "sunrise", computer-based industries; the hiving-off or contracting-out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the "targetting" of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than by the sociological categories of social class; a decline in the

proportion of the skilled male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the "feminisation" of the workforce; an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labour and their greater autonomy from nation-state control; the "globalisation" of the new financial markets, linked by the communications revolution; and new forms of the spatial organisation of social processes.

An issue that must perplex us is how total or complete this transition to post-Fordism is. But this may be a too all-or-nothing way of posing the question. In a permanently transitional age we must expect unevenness, contradictory outcomes, disjunctures, delays, contingencies, uncompleted projects, overlapping emergent ones. We know that earlier transitions (feudalism to capitalism, household production to modern industry) all turned out, on inspection, to be more protracted and incomplete than the theory suggested.

We have to make assessments, not from the completed base, but from the "leading edge" of change. The food industry, which has just arrived at the point where it can guarantee worldwide the standardisation of the size, shape and composition of every hamburger and

every potato (*sic*) chip in a Macdonald's Big Mac from Tokyo to Harare, is clearly just entering its Fordist apogee. However, motor cars, from which the age of Fordism derived its name, with its multiple variations on every model and market specialisation (like the fashion and software industries), is at the leading edge of post-Fordism. The question should always be, where is the "leading edge" and in what direction is it pointing. "Post-Fordism" is also associated with broader social and cultural changes. For example, greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption.

The wider changes remind us that "new times" are both "out there", changing our conditions of life, and "in here", working on us. In part, it is *us* who are being "re-made". A recent writer on the subject, Marshall Berman, notes that, "modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology" — not destroying them entirely, but weakening and subverting them, eroding the lines of continuity which hitherto stabilised our social identities.

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 distinction 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 very coherent way.

In part, the difficulty lies in the very words and concepts we use. For long, being a socialist was synonymous with the ability to translate everything into the language of "structures". In part, the difficulty lies in the fact that men, who so often provide the categories within which *everybody* experiences things, even on the Left, have always found the spectacle of the return of the subjective dimension deeply unnerving. The problem is also theoretical. Classical marxism depended on an assumed correspondence between the "economic" and the "political": one could read off our political attitudes, interests and motivations from our economic class interests and position. This correspondence between "the political" and "the economic" is exactly what has now disintegrated — practically and theoretically. This has had the effect, *inter alia*, of throwing the language of politics more over to the cultural side.

"Post-modernism" is the term which signals this more *cultural* character of "new times". The modernist movement, it argues, which dominated the art and architecture, the cultural imagination, of the early decades of

the 20th century, and came to represent the look and experience of "modernity" itself, is at an end. It has declined into the international style of expressway, slab skyscraper and international airport. Its revolutionary impulse has been tamed and contained by the museum. "Post-modernism" celebrates the penetration of aesthetics into everyday life and the ascendancy of popular culture over the high arts.

Can a socialism of the 21st century survive which is wholly cut off from the landscapes of popular pleasures?

Theorists like Frederick Jameson and Jean-Francois Lyotard agree on many of the characteristics of "the post-modern condition". They remark on the dominance of image, appearance, surface-effect over depth (is Ronald Reagan a president or just a B-movie actor, real or cardboard cut-out, alive or Spitting Image?); the blurring of image and reality (is the Contra war real or only happening on TV?); the preference for parody, nostalgia, kitsch and pastiche over more positive modes of artistic representation (like realism or naturalism); a preference for the popular and the decorative over the brutalist or the functional in architecture and design. They also comment on the erasure of a strong sense of history, the slippage of hitherto stable meanings, the proliferation of difference and the end of what Lyotard calls the "grand narratives" of progress, development, enlightenment and rationality, which until recently were the foundations of all modern philosophy and political theory.

Both Jameson and Baudrillard see post-modernism as part of a "new cultural logic of capital" — "the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion into hitherto uncommodified areas". This brings home the fact that one term which is no longer much in use, though popular in the '50s and '60s, is

"post-capitalist". For the very good reason that the dynamic we are trying to characterise is connected with the revolutionary energy of modern capital — capital *after* what we used to call its "highest stages".

There are different ways of explaining this dramatic, even brutal, resumption of the link between modernity and capitalism. Some argue that, though Marx may have been wrong in his predictions about class as the motor of revolution, he was right — with a vengeance — about capital: its global expansion, transforming everything in its wake, and subordinating every society and relationship under the law of commodification and exchange value. Others argue that, with the failures of the stalinist and social democratic alternatives, capital has acquired a new lease of life: Some economists believe that we are simply in the early, upbeat half of a new Kondratiev "long wave" of capitalist expansion. The American social critic, Marshall Berman, relates "new times" to "the ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world markets". However, whichever explanation we finally settle for, the really startling fact is that *these* "new times" clearly belong to a time-zone marked by the march of capital simultaneously across the globe and through the Maginot Lines of our subjectivities.

The title of Berman's book reminds us that Marx was one of the earliest people to grasp the revolutionary connection between capitalism and modernity, as well as the dialectical relationship between the "outside" and the "inside" of the process. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he spoke of the "constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" which distinguished "the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times". "All fixed, fast-frozen relationships with their train of venerable ideas and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air."

Indeed, as Berman points out, Marx considered the revolution of

modern industry and production the necessary precondition for that promethean or romantic conception of the social individual which towers over his early writings, with its talk of the all-sided development of human capacities. It was not the things which the bourgeoisie created so much as "the processes, the powers, the expressions of human life and energy; men working, moving, cultivating, communicating, organising and reorganising nature and themselves ..." Of course, Marx also understood the one-sided and distorted character of the modernity and type of modern individual produced by this development — how the forms of bourgeois appropriation destroyed the human possibilities it created. But he did not refuse it. What he argued was that *only socialism* could complete the revolution of modernity which capitalism had initiated. He hoped "to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity". Now here exactly is the rub about "new times" for the Left. The "promise" of modernity has become, at the end of the 20th century, considerably more ambiguous, its links with socialism and the Left much more tenuous. We have become more aware of the double-edged and problematic character of modernity; what Theodore Adorno called the "negative dialectics" of enlightenment. Of course, to be "modern" has *always* meant "to live a life of paradox and contradiction... alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead (the line from Nietzsche and Wagner to the death camps?), longing to create and hold on to something real even as everything melts".

But today, the paradoxes seem even more extreme. "Modernity" has acquired a relentlessly uneven and contradictory character. Abundance here, producing poverty there. Greater adversity and choice — but often at the cost of more fragmentation and isolation. More opportunities for participation — but only at the expense of

subordinating oneself to the laws of the market. Novelty and innovation — but driven by what appear to be false needs. The rich West and the famine-stricken South. Development which destroys faster than it creates. The city, privileged scenario of the modern experience for Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin — transformed into the anonymous city, the sprawling city, the inner city.

These stark paradoxes project uncertainty into any secure judgment or assessment of the trends and tendencies of "new times", especially on the Left. Are they to be welcomed for the new possibilities they open? Or rejected for their threat of horrendous disasters (the ecological ones are uppermost in our minds just now) and final closures? We seem, especially on the Left, permanently impaled on the horns of these extreme and irreconcilable alternatives.



It is imperative now for the Left to get past this impossible impasse, these irreconcilable either/or's. There are few better (though many more fashionable) places to begin than with Gramsci's "Americanism and Fordism" essay, which is of seminal importance for this debate, even if it is also a broken and "unfinished" text. This represented a similar effort to describe the dangers and possibilities for the Left of the birth

of that epoch — Fordism — which we are just supposed to be leaving; and in very similar circumstances — retreat and retrenchment of the working class movement, ascendancy of fascism, new surge of capital "with its intensified economic exploitation and authoritarian cultural expression".

If we took our bearings from "Americanism and Fordism", we would be obliged to note that Gramsci's "catalogue of ... most important or interesting problems" relevant to deciding "whether Americanism can constitute a new historical epoch" begins with "a new mechanism of accumulation and distribution of finance capital based directly on industrial production" But it also includes: the rationalisation of the demographic composition of Europe; the balance between endogenous and exogenous change; the phenomenon of mass consumption and "high wages", "psychoanalysis and its enormous diffusion since the war"; the increased "moral coercion" exercised by the state; "modernism"; what he calls "super-city" and "super-country"; feminism, masculinism, and "the question of sex". Who, on the Left, now has the confidence to address the problems and promise of "new times" with a matching comprehensiveness and range?

This lack of boldness is certainly, in part, attributable to the fact that the contradictory forces associated with "new times" are, just now, and have been for some time, firmly in the keeping and under the tutelage of the Right. The Right has imprinted them with the inevitability of its own political project. This may have obscured the fact that what is going on is not the unrolling of a singular, unilinear logic in which the ascendancy of capital, the hegemony of the Right and the march of commodification are indissolubly locked together. They may be *different* processes, with different time scales, which the dominance of the Right has somehow naturalised. But at this point, we encounter an even deeper problem. The Left seems not

just displaced by these processes, but disabled, flattened, becalmed by the very prospect of change; afraid of rooting itself in "the new" and unable to make the leap of imagination required to engage the future. And nowhere more so than in this difficult area of finding a language in which to address the more subjective and cultural dimensions of the revolution of our times.

One strategy might be for the Left to accept this breaking-down of an objectivist political logic. All human action has both its subjective and its objective side. Once we accept the collapse of any automatic linkage between economic class position and political consciousness, we have to recognise that all commitments to act in politics have subjective as well as objective roots. All interests, including class ones, are culturally and ideologically defined. And though individuals are not the "authors" of ideology in the sense of producing it out of nothing from inside our heads, ideologies must work *on and through the subject*, subject-ing us to their play, if they are to have force or effect. "New times" require us to radically rethink the link between history and subjectivity.

Another strategy would be to open our minds to the deeply *cultural* character of the revolution of our times. If "post-Fordism" exists then, it is as much a description of cultural as of economic change. Indeed, that distinction is now quite useless. Culture has ceased to be, if ever it was, a decorative addendum to the "hard world" of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world. The word is now as "material" as the world. Through design, technology and styling, "aesthetics" has already penetrated the world of modern production. Through marketing, layout and style, the "image" provides the mode of representation of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends. And kids, black and white, who can't even spell "post-modernism" but have grown up in the age of computer technology, rock-video and electronic music, already inhabit such a universe in their heads.

Commodified consumption? Trivial pursuits? Yes, much of the time. But underlying that, have we missed the opening up of the individual to the transforming rhythms and forces of modern *material* life? Have we become bewitched by who, in the short run, reaps the profits from these transactions, and missed the deep democratisation of culture which is also part of their hidden agenda? Can a socialism of the 21st century revive, or even survive, which is wholly cut off from the landscapes of popular pleasures, however contradictory a terrain they are? Are we thinking dialectically enough?



Yet another strategy for getting at the more cultural and subjective dimensions of change would be to start from the objective characteristics of post-Fordism and simply turn them inside out. Take the new technologies. They not only introduce new skills and practices. They also require new ways of thinking. Technology, which used to be "hard-nosed" is now "soft". And it no longer operates along one, singular line or path of development. "Planning", in this new technological environment, has less to do with instituting a "regime" out of which a plurality of outcomes will emerge. One, so to speak, plans for contingency. This mode of thinking signals the end of a certain kind of deterministic rationality.

Or consider the proliferation of models and styles, the increased product differentiation, which characterises post-Fordist production. We can see mirrored

there, too, wider processes of cultural diversity and differentiation, related to the multiplication of social worlds and social "logics" typical of modern life in the West.

There has been an enormous expansion of "civil society", caused by the diversification of the different social worlds in which men and women can operate. At present, most people only relate to these worlds through the medium of consumption. But each of these worlds also has its own codes of behaviour, its "scenes" and "economies", and (don't knock it) its "pleasures". These allow the individual some space in which to reassert a measure of choice and control over everyday life and to "play" with its more expressive dimensions. This "pluralisation" of social life expands the roles and identities available to ordinary people (at least in the developed world). Such opportunities need to be more, not less, widely available across the globe. They imply a "socialism" committed to, rather than scared of, diversity and difference.

Of course, "civil society" is no ideal realm of pure freedom. Its micro-worlds include the multiplication of points of power and conflict. More and more of our everyday lives are caught up with these forms of power, and their lines of intersection. Far from there being no resistance to the system, there has been a proliferation of new points of antagonism, new social movements of resistance organised around them and, consequently, a generalisation of "politics" to spheres which hitherto the Left assumed to be apolitical; a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body. What we lack is any overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances. Perhaps there isn't, in that sense, one "power game" at all, more a network of strategies and powers and their articulations — and thus a politics which is always positional ...

One of these critical "new" sites of politics is the arena of social reproduction. On the Left, we know about the reproduction of labour power. But what do we really know

— outside of feminism — about ideological, cultural, sexual reproduction? One of the characteristics of this area of “reproduction” is that it is both material and symbolic, since we are reproducing, not only the cells of the body but also the categories of the culture. Even consumption, in some ways the privileged terrain of reproduction, is no less symbolic for being material. In a world tyrannised by scarcity, people nevertheless express in their practical lives not only what they need for material existence but some sense of their symbolic place in the world, of who they are, their identities. One should not miss this drive to take part in the theatre of the social.

Of course, the preoccupation with consumption and style may appear trivial — though more so to men, who tend to have themselves “reproduced” at arm’s length from the grubby processes of shopping and buying and getting and therefore take it less seriously than women for whom it was destiny, life’s “work”. But the fact is that greater and greater numbers of people (men *and* women) — with however little money — play the game of using things to signify who they are. Everybody, including people in poor societies whom we in the West frequently speak about as if they inhabit a world *outside* of culture, knows that today’s “goods” double up as social signs and produce meanings as well as energy. There is no evidence that, in a socialist economy, our propensity to “code” things according to systems of meaning, which is an essential feature of our sociality, would *necessarily* cease — or, indeed, should.

This recognition of the expanded cultural and subjective ground on which any socialism of the 21st century must stand, relates, in a significant way, to feminism or, better still, what we might call “the feminisation of the social”. We should distinguish this from the simplistic version of “the future as female”, espoused by some tendencies within the women’s movement, but recently subject to Lynn Segal’s persuasive critique. It

arises from the remarkable — and irreversible — transformation in the position of women in modern life and the rebirth of a modern feminism itself.

Feminism and the social movements around sexual politics have thus had an unsettling effect on everything once thought of as “settled” in the theoretical universe of the Left. And nowhere more dramatically than in its power to decentre the characteristic conversations of the Left by bringing on to the political agenda the question of sexuality. This is more than the Left being “nice” to women or lesbians or gay men or beginning to address their forms of oppression. It has to do with the revolution in thinking which follows in the wake of the recognition that *all* social practices and forms of domination — including the politics of the Left — are always inscribed in and to some extent secured by sexual identity and positioning. If we don’t attend to how gendered identities are formed and transformed and how they are deployed politically, we simply do not have a language of sufficient explanatory power at our command with which to understand the institutionalisation of power in our society and the secret sources of our resistances to change.

After another of those meetings of the Left where the question of sexuality has run like an electric current which nobody knows how to plug into, one is tempted to say *especially* the resistances to change *on the Left*.

Thatcherism is certainly fully aware of this implication of sexuality and identity in politics. It has powerfully organised itself around particular forms of patriarchy and cultural or national identity. Its defence of “Englishness” is a key to some of the unexpected sources of Thatcherism’s popularity. For that very reason, “Englishness”, as a privileged and restrictive cultural identity, is becoming a site of contestation from those ethnic and racial groups who insist on cultural diversity as a positive goal.

The Left should not be afraid of this surprising return of ethnicity.

Though ethnicity has sometimes been a powerfully reactionary force, the *new* forms of ethnicity are articulated, politically, in a different direction. By “ethnicity” we mean the commitment to those points of attachment which give the individual some sense of “place” and position in the world, whether these be in relation to particular communities, localities, territories, languages, religion or cultures. These days, black writers and film-makers refuse to be restricted only to addressing black subjects. But they insist that others recognise that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power. Because these positions change and alter, there is always a politics of position.

This insistence on “positioning” provides people with co-ordinates, which are specially important in the face of the enormous globalisation and transnational character of many of the processes which now shape their lives. The “new times” seem to have gone “global” and “local” at the same moment. And the question of ethnicity reminds us that everybody comes from some place — even if only an “imagined community” — and needs some sense of identification. A politics which neglects that moment is not likely to be able to command the “new times”.

Could there be “new times” without “new subjects”? Have the forces remaking the modern world left the subjects of that process untouched? Is change possible while we remain untransformed? It was always unlikely and is certainly an untenable proposition now. It is one of those many “fixed and fast-frozen relationships, venerable ideas and opinions” which, as Marx predicted, “new times” quietly melted into air.

A longer version of this article appeared in the October edition of *Marxism Today*. Published by arrangement.

STUART HALL’s collection of essays *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* will be published by Verso in the summer.