The POST-FORDIST Persuasion

Post-Fordism has become an influential model of the current watershed in the Western economies and societies. In Australia its most passionate advocate has been John Mathews. But Barry Hindess remains sceptical. Here he critically assesses Mathews' work on post-Fordism and democracy.

In the summer of 1989 a relatively junior official of the US State Department with (by his own assessment) "little impact on policy" published "The End of History" in the conservative American journal The National Interest. The article became a cause celebre in America and in other Western societies. It was also, in the author's view, widely misunderstood.

In reply to his critics Fukuyama suggested that the most common misunderstanding involved "Hegel's use of the word 'history'". History, he claimed, is less a matter of worldly events than it is a matter "of thought about first principles, including those governing political and social organisation". The end of history then means that human thought about such first principles can go no further: it has reached the end of the road.

The principles in question, of course, are those of liberal democracy - the legacy of the French and especially the American revolutions. Fukuyama does not claim that the struggle for democracy is now complete. On the contrary, he believes that it has been widely resisted and that we should expect such resistance to continue for some considerable time. Fukuyama's point is rather that there is no prospect of the liberal democratic trend being permanently reversed or superseded.

Fukuyama's reply closes with a series of rhetorical questions. The most important of these asks if it is conceivable that a system of slavery or of aristocratic or monarchical government could, in the future, have moral foundations "as secure as those of present-day democracies". The question of what is now conceivable exposes the limitations of Fukuyama's (and Hegel's) confidence in the end of history. The way in which we now think can tell us nothing about how we or others may think in the future. The outer limits to what is now conceivable are inscribed in our present patterns of thought and, without departing from the present, there is no way that we can hope to move beyond those limits. There may be a touch of bravura, but the implied confidence will always lack ultimate justification.

No one on the Left would accept Fukuyama's account of the end of history, and few would wish to express themselves in his 'Hegelian' terms. Nevertheless, there is an important sense in which 'democracy' has come to occupy a similar place in the ideas of many on the Left as that of 'liberal-democracy' in Fukuyama's discussion. For a decade or more socialist thinkers in the West have been busy reworking socialist arguments in terms of ideas of democracy and civil society. Socialism, it seems, is now to
be understood in terms of a radical democratisation of the political, social and economic institutions already in place in the ‘democratic’ capitalist societies of the modern West. Electoral democracy and its associated political liberties will be left intact under this program, but the major institutions of civil society and the State together with the political parties and interest groups that mediate between them will become far more democratic. Socialism represents, on this account, the culmination of the democratic revolution: it is the end of an history, if not of history itself.

John Mathews’ work is unusual among variations on this theme in that it explicitly relates the argument for radical democratisation to an account of fundamental changes of economic organisation now taking place in advanced western societies. In *A Culture of Power, Tools of Change* and *Age of Democracy*, Mathews has set out to provide social democracy and the labour movement with a new paradigm, a coherent alternative vision embodying a set of principles and assumptions intended to serve as a guide to practical politics. The paradigm itself derives both from a commitment to enhanced democracy and from a particular view of Fordism.

Following an idea suggested by Gramsci, Mathews uses the term ‘Fordism’ to refer not to mass production alone, but rather to a “combination of mass production and organised mass consumption”. The assumption is that successful mass production requires a corresponding level of mass consumption that can be sustained only if there are high levels of employment in the major industrial economies. Fordism in the organisation of production must be complemented by a Keynesian political agenda at the level of the national economy. Mathews claims that social democracy in the years following World War Two “was completely subservient to the requirements of Fordism” both in its political agenda and in the character of its organisational structures.

Like other systems, however, Fordism contains the seeds of its own destruction. Internally it came up against workers’ resistance in the intensification and fragmentation of labour. Externally, its own success led to increasing competition from mass production industries first in Japan and later in what are currently called newly industrialising countries. Finally, these pressures on the Fordist regime have been strengthened as a result of the emergence of new, more flexible forms of work organisation in several of the advanced capitalist economies.

The decline of Fordism opens up the possibility of new paths of development for advanced Western societies. It also presents new opportunities and new dangers for the labour movement and for social democracy itself. Mathews divides these paths of development into two polar types.

One, associated with the New Right, is based on a strategy of neo-Fordism. This involves a polarisation of the workforce into a skilled and highly-paid elite on the one hand and a mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers on the other; authoritarianism in the workplace, a tendency towards deregulation in government approaches to the economy and the long-term decline of unionism and of social-democratic politics. The other, Mathews’ preferred alternative, is post-Fordism, a trend which involves the development of flexible specialisation in the workplace, increased worker participation in production decisions, and a focus on quality, skilled worker input and product innovation.

In contrast to neo-Fordism, which entails a clear division between management and workers, post-Fordism offers a real prospect of overcoming the zero-sum character of Fordist industrial relations. The democratic character of industrial organisation would serve workers’ aspirations to greater control in the workplace and, at the same time, provide management with a more flexible and dedicated workforce.

Furthermore, just as Fordism has ramifications that go beyond the workplace, so also does post-Fordism. A workforce committed to product innovation is a workforce that is willing and able to live with the impermanence not only of its skills but also of many of its current fields of employment. Just as a viable Fordist economy presupposes Keynesian economic management and a welfare state, so a viable post-Fordism will require its own regime of economic management and social welfare programs. If the emphasis on product innovation and flexibility in production is not to lead to a neo-Fordist polarisation of the workforce, then there must be public intervention with regard to new capital formation to ensure the emergence of appropriate new fields of employment and suitably generous provision for the unemployed. Here, too, Mathews sees the need for considerable further democratisation, with the institutions of the labor movement playing a central role.

Although he hesitates to describe his paradigm as socialist (and in *A Culture of Power* was ambivalent about the use of the term), Mathews’ argument that there is a clear economic foundation to political change suggests a continuity with older traditions of socialist thought, and especially with marxism. His proposals for a greatly expanded democracy are those of a socialist, not a radical democrat.

Mathews’ determination to tie his reworking of socialist ideas with an account of the political and social consequences of current developments in the advanced Western economies is one of the strengths of his work. Unfortunately, the manner in which he attempts to carry out his project generates a host of problems. The most important are: Mathews’ view of the role of theory; his inability to escape from a commitment to enhanced democracy and from a particular view of Fordism; his determination to tie his reworking of socialist ideas with an account of the political and social consequences of current developments in the advanced Western economies; and his enthusiasm for the theme of radical democratisation.

An underlying theme of Mathews’ recent work is that the social democratic labour movement is in danger of losing its way. He therefore sees it as necessary to articulate a vision of the future which can guide the practical activities of that movement and its allies in the struggle to create a better world. The vision that Mathews presents us with is the paradigm of associative democracy: this brings together electoral democracy and a plurality of associations, each of which is democratic and internally self-governing. Mathews insists that elements of the new
paradigm already exist in fragmentary form in many of the practices and innovations of the labour movement and other social movements.

However, there are several presumptions within Mathews' paradigm which could bear further scrutiny. We can begin with an idea that is still widely accepted on the Left, namely that we desperately need a coherent "vision of a new social and economic order". The appeal to such a vision is problematic in at least two respects. First, it strongly suggests an image of the new order and, at least by implication, of the status quo which it will one day replace, as unified social wholes or totalities. There is more than a hint of essentialism here, and I will return to this later.

Secondly, the vision is usually presented as providing a means of unifying many, or all, of the diverse groups and interests on the Left. It is intended as the foundation of an ideal unity based on a common long-term purpose. This type of unity can be distinguished from its limited and merely prosaic counterpart - this latter being fostered by the pursuit of immediate and short-term objectives, or by the structures and procedures and the behavioural norms of organisations like the Australian labour movement or the European Community.

An overarching and long-term unity of purpose has long been a figment of the radical imagination. However, as Gramsci observed, the strength of the Catholic Church in Italy was that it offered not one but several doctrines, each of which could be taken up by a different section of the population. A similar point could be made about political movements: they have always drawn their support from a variety of different interests and purposes and such unity of action as they are able to achieve is constructed across those differences.

The dream of an ideal unity has never been realised, but it survives despite that. Worse: it contradicts the commitment to pluralism that is now ritually invoked by any self-respecting position on the Left. A pluralist society is one containing a real diversity of interests and purposes and in which any vision of an ideal unity of purpose must remain a fantasy.

A fundamental problem for all but the most single-minded of authoritarian politics involves the construction and maintenance of a practical and prosaic unity of action in the face of such diversity. Mathews himself notes that "parties are social organisms where a number of interests intersect". Quite so. To appeal to a vision as the basis of political unity is to deny the reality of the differences between those interests.

In fact, the idea of associative democracy has rather less to offer such a vision than Mathews would have us believe. Associative democracy refers to a type of society which consists of a plurality of independent associations, the great majority of which should be internally self-governing and democratic, and in which disputes would normally be resolved by negotiation. What such a society provides, in other words, is a framework in which a great variety of purposes and interests might be pursued, and procedures for resolving many of the differences between them. In that respect the prospect of associative democracy has something to offer almost everybody.

As a vision of the future it is singularly lacking in substance. Apart from its claim that matters will be dealt with democratically, it tells us nothing about the substantive content of social arrangements. A more democratic society may produce humane and civilised social welfare policies, but it will not necessarily do so. Democratic arrangements may well produce the industrial, investment and economic policy decisions that will lead us into Mathews' post-Fordist future, but they cannot be relied on to do so as a simple outcome of their democratic character.

The pressing economic and social problems now facing Australia, and other countries with an influential social democratic tradition, are not directly addressed by the appeal to associative democracy as a desirable way of doing things. In fact, many of the distinctive features of Mathews' future post-Fordist society are linked to political decisions that in no way presupposes greater democracy. Mathews' vision contains two very different components: one says that things should be done democratically; the other outlines desirable substantive outcomes. One does not follow from the other, and the connection between the two remains obscure. Mathews' problem lies in presenting them as belonging to the same coherent vision.

Mathews is rightly critical of the role of "such fugitive abstractions as the 'capitalist system'" in much political analysis of the Left. However, while he explicitly rejects marxist essentialism, his own analysis retains many of its features. A related problem appears in Mathews' treatment of Fordism and its neo- and post-Fordist alternatives. Fordism is described not only as a technique for organising the production of certain types of commodity but also, and more generally, as a total system of social and economic organisation "standardising the world of consumption, politics and culture in its own image". Indeed, it is as a system that Fordism contains the seeds of its own destruction.

These totalising tendencies cannot be dismissed as unfortunate but relatively minor aberrations. They play a central role in much of Mathews' argument. The 'capitalist system' and other such fugitive abstractions may have been banished from the text, but their consequences remain.

The neo- and post-Fordist futures are presented as total social packages, representing distinct and opposed principles of social organisation and correspondingly distinct and opposed sets of social interests. On the one side we have the anti-democratic principles of the New Right and its associates, and on the other the principle of enhanced democracy supported by the social democratic labour movement and its allies. The choice of post-Fordism would require a transformation of the labour movement; it must move from "a culture of opposition to a culture of the responsible exercise of power within a democratised system".

Yet the notion of democracy is not without ambiguity. Remarkably different understandings of democracy coexist in the modern world, and there is little point in
trying to establish that any one of them provides a truer account than any of the others. In Western societies the term 'democracy' is often used to refer to a package of positive features that are believed to be exhibited in the political arrangements of those societies. Precisely what it is about the arrangements in question that should be regarded as either democratic or as desirable often is not clearly identified. In addition, whatever is so identified can vary considerably from one section of society to another and according to context. In the democratic societies of the West, then, democracy may be regarded as a good thing for a wide range of reasons.

Because the reasons are so diverse a very broad cross-section of the society is able to justify current political arrangements. Yet that same diversity can generate considerable conflict when proposals to change current political arrangements are at issue. What appears as an increase in democratic control from one perspective can appear as a corruption of democracy by sectional interests from another. Three issues are particularly worth noting in this respect.

First, there is an obvious tension between, on the one hand, the desire to bring what are thought to be significant aspects of society under democratic control and, on the other, the liberal concern with the institutional conditions required for the maintenance of political liberty. A democracy without individual liberty would have few attractions in Australia and elsewhere. Yet any worthwhile liberty presupposes real and effective constraints on the actions of government and other centres of power. The Left has often been accused - not without justice - of paying insufficient attention to this issue.

Secondly, any program of democratisation must address the issue of the institutional arrangements through which that program is to be realised. An appeal to democracy tells us nothing about the precise definition of the constituencies that should be involved in the management of, say, a university, a public hospital system, or the transport industry in Australia. Nor does it provide the procedural rules by which any organisational framework in which the representatives of these constituencies might be expected to work together. However, the more important point to notice is that any decision concerning how democracy is to be institutionalised will invariably advantage some of the interests involved and disadvantage others. Here, too, the idea of democratisation can be a source of conflict.

Thirdly, there is a closely related problem in the program of associative democracy itself. That program envisages a society in which electoral democracy coexists with a plurality of democratically organised, self-governing associations. Leaving aside the problem already noted with the idea of democratisation, that program also contains, although in a rather different form, the tension between democracy and liberty indicated above. The role of the State remains profoundly problematic for the advocates of associative democracy. The problems involved cannot be wished away by the claim that the State will "play the role of the 'association of associations'".

Imagine, for instance, a society in which corporations such as Ansett and BHP are democratically organised, self-governing associations. In certain respects we might well prefer it to Australia as it is today. However, such a society would still contain private business corporations, and the difficulties that these now pose for democratically elected government - viz, the limitation of its capacity to determine what matters affecting the economic and social life of society should be decided by the people themselves or their elected representatives and what matters can safely be left to others. Organisations of various kinds have become an increasingly important part of the life of Western societies over the past hundred or so years. Many of these are influential political actors in their own community, or even in several communities at once. The political power that they wield would remain even if they were to become internally democratic.

This brings us to my final set of comments. Democracy in the modern period has generally been conceived of as operating within some well-defined community; either a nation state or some association, organisation, or smaller community within a nation state and subject to its laws. Democracy proposes to deal with an unpredictable world by bringing that world within the collective control of members of the relevant community. The internationalisation of economic activity (and of much else besides) suggests the need for a different approach, one in which the governance of the world and the design of institutional constraints need not be conceived as operating within self-contained communities.

This suggests that there will be at least one set of problems in the modern world that cannot be effectively addressed by the democratic focus on the nation state and what goes on within it. It is not difficult to find other issues of contemporary society where democracy as traditionally conceived has little to offer - these include gender relations and the constitution of human individuals as gendered subjects as well as forms of social regulation and surveillance involving law, medicine and psychiatry.

While the idea of a considerably more democratic society may well be worth supporting, it does not take us very far. Not only does it fail directly to address pressing social and economic problems, but there are important contemporary issues for which the theme of radical democratisation seems somewhat beside the point. Nevertheless, Mathews, and all too many others, propose to make that theme the centre of an updating of the socialist project, in order that it might be rendered appropriate to the conditions of the advanced Western societies in the 1990s and beyond. For all its up-to-the-minute talk of post-Fordism and new technology, the appeal to radical democratisation represents a failure to come to terms with some of the most significant political issues to have emerged in these societies in recent years. In this respect the program of radical democratisation, like Fukuyama's proclamation of 'the end of history', reads more like a failure of the imagination.

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