

# Discussion

## Thatcherism - a new stage?

Stuart Hall

Broadly speaking, I think the analysis of the emergence of the 'radical Right' which I began to sketch in 'The Great Moving Right Show' (*Marxism Today* January 79) has been largely confirmed by subsequent events. That view has since been considerably deepened and extended by other contributors (Martin Jacques in *Marxism Today* October 79; Gamble in *Marxism Today* November 79; Leonard and Corrigan in December 79 *Marxism Today*). We need to take this analysis further, if our political response to the crisis is to be an informed one. Especially, we need a more detailed account of the effects of particular policies in different areas: we need a better and deeper analysis of the 'new economic strategy': we need a sounder and fuller set of alternatives: above all, we need a detailed and sober assessment of how the struggles against and resistances to 'Thatcherism' are developing, their strengths and weaknesses. On either side — theirs and ours — our watchword must be 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. In the months ahead, we shall require a mobilisation of all the available resources — theoretical, political, tactical. The key to 'Thatcherism' is the global character — the hegemonic thrust — of its intervention. Nothing short of a counter-hegemonic strategy of resistance is capable of matching it on the terrain of struggle which it is day-by-day beginning to map out.

It needs to be said at once that the sense of immediate movement which is given by the first signs of organised resistance to the cuts and the imposition of the new economic strategy may be deceptive. I don't mean to

deny for a moment the importance, the absolute necessity, of effectively conducted defensive struggles. Conjuncturally, everything will depend on this sort of effective mobilisation. But we need to remind ourselves, as several contributors correctly noted, that we have seen, in our period, a major counteroffensive, mounted by the working class and other social forces in the period 1972-4, which had the effect immediately of stemming the tide of 'Heathism', but which did not succeed in deflecting the long-term and deep currents and movements towards the right. If the analysis of 'Thatcherism' is correct in broad outlines, one thing is crystal clear: a defensive struggle is no longer enough.

### The nature of Thatcherism

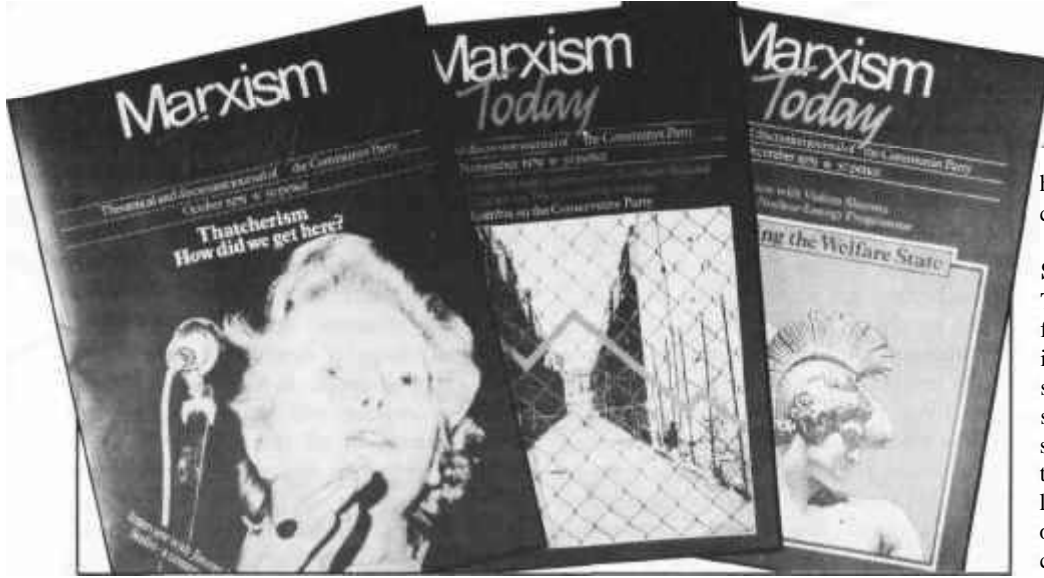
Perhaps it might be worth summarising briefly the points on which all the contributors to the debate so far appear to be agreed. 'Thatcherism' represents something qualitatively new in British politics. Elements of a 'radical Right' programme and offensive were indeed incipient in earlier manifestations — for example, in the 'Powellism' of the 1968-9 period, and in the Heath programme in 1970, as Gamble has reminded us. But the constitution of all those elements into a radical political force, capable of setting new terms to the political struggle, and effectively condensing a wide range of social and political issues and themes under the social market philosophy and banner of the radical Right is a qualitatively new political event. We must take account of the *radicalism* of this intervention. It has decisively broken with the politics of stalemate, with the whole repertoire of crisis management adopted by both previous Labour and Tory administrations, and with the very terms of the political and ideological consensus which stabilised the political crisis for so long. It has buried neo-Keynesianism, the cornerstone of the 'modernist' strategy; it has broken up old-style corporatism; it has mounted an effective counter-offensive to social-democratic and liberal-conservative forms of 'statism', both economically and ideologically. It means, not to tinker with this or that mechanism, but to change the terms of the struggle, to shift the balance of class forces irrevocably to the Right. It is the only parliamentary political force resolutely committed to the view that 'things cannot go on in the old way'. It knows that it must de-struct in order fundamentally to re-construct.

Then we must take account of the *global* character of its offensive. It means to promulgate not just a new set of policies but a new ethic, to construct a new form of

'commonsense'. It has a model for every feature and aspect of social relationship: it has a 'philosophy' as well as a programme. This hegemonic character to its intervention is something profoundly new, in terms of the radical breaks which it is prepared to make with the whole inherited baggage of assumptions and attitudes. Then we must take account of its effective *penetration* into the very heartland of Labour's support: in the unions, the working class and other social strata. Leonard and Corrigan especially have shown clearly the manner and degree to which 'Thatcherism' has rooted itself in the contradictory experience of the working class under social democratic forms of 'statism' — rooted itself, exploited those contradictions, effectively presented itself as *the* 'popular force' in the 'struggle' of 'the people' against 'the state' — and thereby effectively mobilised a measure of popular support for imposed solutions, for a more authoritarian form of state, within the dominated classes. What is aimed for is a radical and, if possible, permanent shift in the balance of class forces in a 'radical Right' direction. This attempt to colonise and articulate the contradictory experiences and conditions of the dominated classes in the direction of the radical Right *has* met with a measure of popular support. We must not on any account underestimate its success in disorganising the forces of opposition, in breaking up and fragmenting the defensive organisations of the class. Before we take heart at the resistance of the steel workers to the brutal policies of closure and deflation, let us pause a moment to recall the Leyland vote.

### Can it succeed?

Can 'Thatcherism' survive? Can it 'succeed'? Or will it disintegrate as a result of its own internal contradictions? There is certainly no guarantee of its success. It is beset by internal contradictions and subject to real limits. It won a measure of electoral support on the basis of a set of opportunist, calculated instrumental promises. It cannot deliver on them all. The promise immediately to put more money in people's pockets turned out to be a simple electoral fraud. The temporary alliance it attempted to forge between its own ideological commitment to monetarism and the opposition in some sections of the working class to another round of social contracting and the drive to return to 'free collective bargaining' is already much dissipated by the effects of the new economic policy, closures and rising unemployment. Appeals to self-reliance and individualism look hollow in the face of massive state and welfare expenditure cuts. This experience of what 'Thatcherism' really means in power will



undoubtedly undermine some part of its electoral support and drive into opposition some of those constituencies which it won on the most opportunist basis. Clearly, the Government will face here a major crisis in the 'politics of electoral support'. As to limits: there is little evidence that the new economic policies will have any real effect in turning the economic tide. It is not touching the structural economic problems at home and it is powerless to ward off the savage effects of a global capitalist recession which promises to be deeper and more protracted than at first expected. There is no straight road ahead for the radical Right.

I do not personally take as much immediate comfort from all this as many others do on the Left. I think 'Thatcherism' has been very effective in constructing a 'crisis' frame of mind: in deliberately lowering expectations and in creating an expectation that things will have to get much worse before they get better. Some who followed Mrs Thatcher to the polls for reasons of short-term immediate gain will fall away from her support. But others will hold through thick and thin, because she continues to offer a radical, root-and-branch solution to a situation which borders on the 'unthinkable'. She may come a cropper in the end: but her Government has won power on what I would call a 'long leash'. 'Thatcherism' is riding deep contradictions, in crisis conditions. It is unlikely to be blown off course by an immediate crisis of electoral support. Besides, the degree of ideological commitment is such that I would expect the Government to fall before it executes another of those graceful U-turns. It is also directly relevant to ask what precisely would be gained, in the long term, by a reversal which brought to power either another variant of Heath Toryism or another bout of Mr Callaghan, with the same policies as before. I think there is an illusion around that it might still be possible to go back to the old *status quo*. But I think this underestimates both the depth of the crisis and the degree to which

Thatcherism has irrevocably undermined 'the old solutions and positions'. There may be alternatives to 'Thatcherism': but there is no simple 'going back', no return to base 1, in the conditions which now prevail. In those terms, I believe that Martin Jacques is right when he suggests that, one way or another, Thatcherism has broken the long political stalemate and already fundamentally changed the political rules of the game.

#### Thatcherism and big capital

I think it also matters what we mean by 'success'. 'Thatcherism' could well succeed in its long term mission to shift the balance of class forces to the right, without itself surviving for years in power in the parliamentary sense. Even the old social democratic game of 'social contracts' and deflationary wages policies would be a very different matter from previous years if it were to be conducted on the basis of a series of working class defeats, face to face with unions curtailed by legal limits in their freedom to organise, in a stimulated mood of anti-unionism, in the wake of a set of struggles in which the employed were forced to fight for jobs against the unemployed, skilled against unskilled, men against women, blacks against whites. This would be a working class movement against which serious damage had been inflicted; and in that sense, 'Thatcherism' would have done its political work, even if it could not survive in power. This is too pessimistic a perspective: but it qualifies what we mean by its 'success'. I doubt very much whether big capital has much long-term confidence in the capacity of a brutally simple monetarist doctrine to stem the tide of the recession. What they are looking to Mrs Thatcher to do is to shift the balance of political forces. They have supported her because they see in 'Thatcherism' the only political force capable of altering the relations of forces in a manner favourable to the imposition of capitalist solutions. They have supported her on political and ideological grounds. In that sense, the long-term political mission of the radical Right could

'succeed' even if this particular Government had to give way to one of another electoral complexion.

#### Socialism and statism

This brings us to the response. Here the Left finds itself in a serious dilemma. The immediate response is bound to be a defensive one: fight the cuts, defend the right to strike, curtail the erosion of civil liberties, stem the tide . . . Necessarily, the Left will throw itself into this sort of struggle. But its limits must surely by now be clear to everyone. 'Thatcherism' has exposed the limited character of a struggle which remains a defensive one. Here, too, we need to draw directly on the lessons of our analysis. The key lies in the arguments put by Leonard and Corrigan. 'Thatcherism' succeeded on the back of a deep and profound disillusionment among ordinary people with the very form of social democratic 'statism' to which previous governments, in their different ways, have been committed. That type of 'statism' implied a very distinct view of the state itself — as a centralised bureaucracy, a neutral beneficiary, which at best did things to and for people, but which was substantively outside their control. It was largely *experienced* in negative and oppressive ways. As a set of real, lived practices, this form of 'statism' implied a particular way in which classes and other social forces were represented politically — at several removes from the actual exercise of power, through the occupancy of parliamentary power, increasingly distant and remote from the real conditions of life. It was based on a particular view of how parties represent and thus form the 'classes' politically. It represented the dominated classes as passive recipients, as clients of a state run by experts and professionals over which people exercised no real or substantive control. This state was increasingly 'lived' as an arbitrary and deeply undemocratic power: increasingly, in whomsoever's keeping it was, it served to *discipline* the classes it claimed to represent. In the development of her anti-statist philosophy, Mrs Thatcher has successfully identified this kind of 'statism' with Labour — and with socialism. It was then possible to represent the resistance to and disenchantment with this form of 'statism' as a resistance, not only to Labour, but more fundamentally to socialism itself. In this way Thatcherism has successfully identified itself with the *popular* struggle against a bureaucratically centralist form of the capitalist state. And the harsh truth is that this was possible because, in many respects, this was and *is* what large sections of the Left do actually mean by 'socialism'. And what 'Thatcherism' irrevocably demonstrates is

that there is no longer a popular majority for this form of the state.

### Democracy — at the heart of the matter.

I think we can draw two immediate lessons from this analysis. First, that the reconstruction of a popular force on the left, capable of articulating the crisis to the Left, is *intrinsically* linked with the struggle to deepen, develop and actively transform the forms of popular democratic struggle. Democracy — in the light of the practical critique of 'statism' which the Thatcherite success misrepresents — is no longer marginal or tangential to the struggle: it is the very heart of the matter. Second, that the defensive struggle will get us nowhere if it is posed simply as a return to the state of things before the deluge. To put it simply, the defensive struggle cannot succeed unless it contains an active and positive content — of a new kind. The formulation of a new conception of socialism, far from being some ideal activity which we can postpone to better times, is the only *practical* way in which the crisis can not simply be stemmed, but actually turned in a positive direction. Without meeting these two pre-requisites, we may win the odd engagement or two in the coming months: but we will lose the war of position.

Two more practical things are required to provide the minimum basis of this kind of 'global' response from the Left. The first is the unification of the working class; the second is the construction of a historical alliance which alone is capable of constituting that 'social force' which could turn the tide of 'Thatcherism'. By 'unification', I mean a particular way of conducting the political struggle. Unification is an active process. It does not mean expressing politically that unity which we suppose to be already there. For no such thing exists. The working class is, indeed, remorselessly divided and fragmented by capital itself, by the action of the

state and by the intervention of Thatcherism itself. There is no single class there waiting to take the political stage: just as there is no necessary, inevitable and automatic inclination of such a class 'towards socialism'. If Thatcherism has accomplished anything, it must surely be the ditching of these comfortable and comforting guarantees. We must think instead of how the unity of the class can be actively produced and constructed in the way in which the struggle itself is prosecuted. This means returning to all those worn-out questions about the forms of political organisation, about the basis on which more unified struggles can be developed, and about the deeply undemocratic character of most of the major institutions and organisations of the Left itself. The question of the nature, procedures, organisational structures and conception of new forms of political representation, of a more, broadly mass and democratic character, is on the agenda: not a matter of 'after the immediate struggle is over'. This is what the 'immediate struggle' is about.

### Alliances — in practice.

But the unity of the class — even if it could be brought about — could not in and of itself be nearly sufficient. For, as we suggested, the intervention of the radical Right is a global one. It has effectively condensed under its slogans and banners a variety of real antagonisms which do not have an immediate class character; and it seeks to neutralise a whole number of deep social struggles which have a fundamentally democratic character and are deeply defined and over-determined by class relations, but which are not reducible to them. Unless, in the course of the resistance to Thatcherism, we can constitute a pole of *popular* struggle, which increasingly wins over into an effective alliance the constituencies which are the key subjects of these other forms of struggle, the struggle against Thatcherism will lack precisely that popular

character capable of challenging the hegemonic offensive which it represents. But the left has little real knowledge of, or indeed much stomach for, the hard politics of constructing, not mere temporary 'associations' of an opportunistic kind, but real and durable historical alliances, or of building up a genuinely popular democratic social force. For such alliances, if they are not mere window dressing, will require the profound *transformation* of all the forces which are pulled together in this way. A sexist labour movement cannot win the deep support of an active and radical feminist movement; racist organisations cannot provide the basis for the construction of a political unity in struggle between black and white workers: feminists who do not see the relevance of the defence of the right to strike to their own struggles cannot enter into an alliance which is more than temporary with the organised working class. It may be that the internal transformations of practice and organisation which alone could gradually construct a political historical *bloc* of this order — which, like 'Thatcherism' is capable of putting on the political agenda, not a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, but a *new form of the state* — are too traumatic; and that the forces which maintain and reproduce these internal divisions and separations are too rigid, deeply entrenched, historically binding to be overcome. In that event, we may indeed succeed in 'defeating' Thatcherism: but the inheritor of that victory would be Mr Callaghan and Mr Healey.

Is there a political force capable of setting aside the *slogan* of the 'broad democratic alliance' and 'popular democratic struggle', and entering — directly in the teeth of the crisis — into the *politics* and the *practice* of this war of positions against the radical Right? Is there, in short, a political force capable of renewing the movement 'towards socialism'? Is there a doctor in the house? •

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