

# Reviews

## THE POLITICS OF THATCHERISM Ed Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques

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To start with the compliments: *Marxism Today*, in which the bulk of these essays had their genesis, has become incomparably the most interesting of British political journals. Nowhere else will you find such a sustained depth of analysis. The piece by David Currie, for example, on 'World Capitalism in Recession' is a masterly objective statement that belongs to no obvious political stable. Note the way he demolishes the argument that the first oil crisis is the sole or even the main cause of present economic problems. Note too the proper attention given to the fluctuations of exchange rates and the new sources of competition from the newly industrialised countries. All this is streets ahead of anything that has recently come from the Labour Party, or from the Conservative Party either for that matter. Moreover, the pieces in general are extremely weir-written and a pleasure to read.

Now for the criticisms. There is a passage in the introduction which first gave me pause. 'Thatcherism,' it is said, 'has deep roots in the political traditions of the Right.' There is then a reference to the backwoods of the Tory Party, 'who, in the era of permissiveness, regularly turned out at Party conferences to embarrass the front bench modernisers by their faithful support for hanging, law and order, censorship, the virtues of competition, and racist programmes.' I read that sentence three times. It is the words 'the virtues of competition' which stand out. I have attended many Tory Party Conferences over

the years and never have I noticed the backwoods baying for competition, nor even the front bench modernisers either come to that. Indeed it is one of the characteristics of the contemporary Party that competition policy has been one of the issues that it has always shied away from. Mr Cecil Parkinson, now the Party Chairman and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry besides, was supposed to produce a paper on it while in opposition, but never got round to it. The Party had still not got round to it by the time of the 1983 election manifesto.

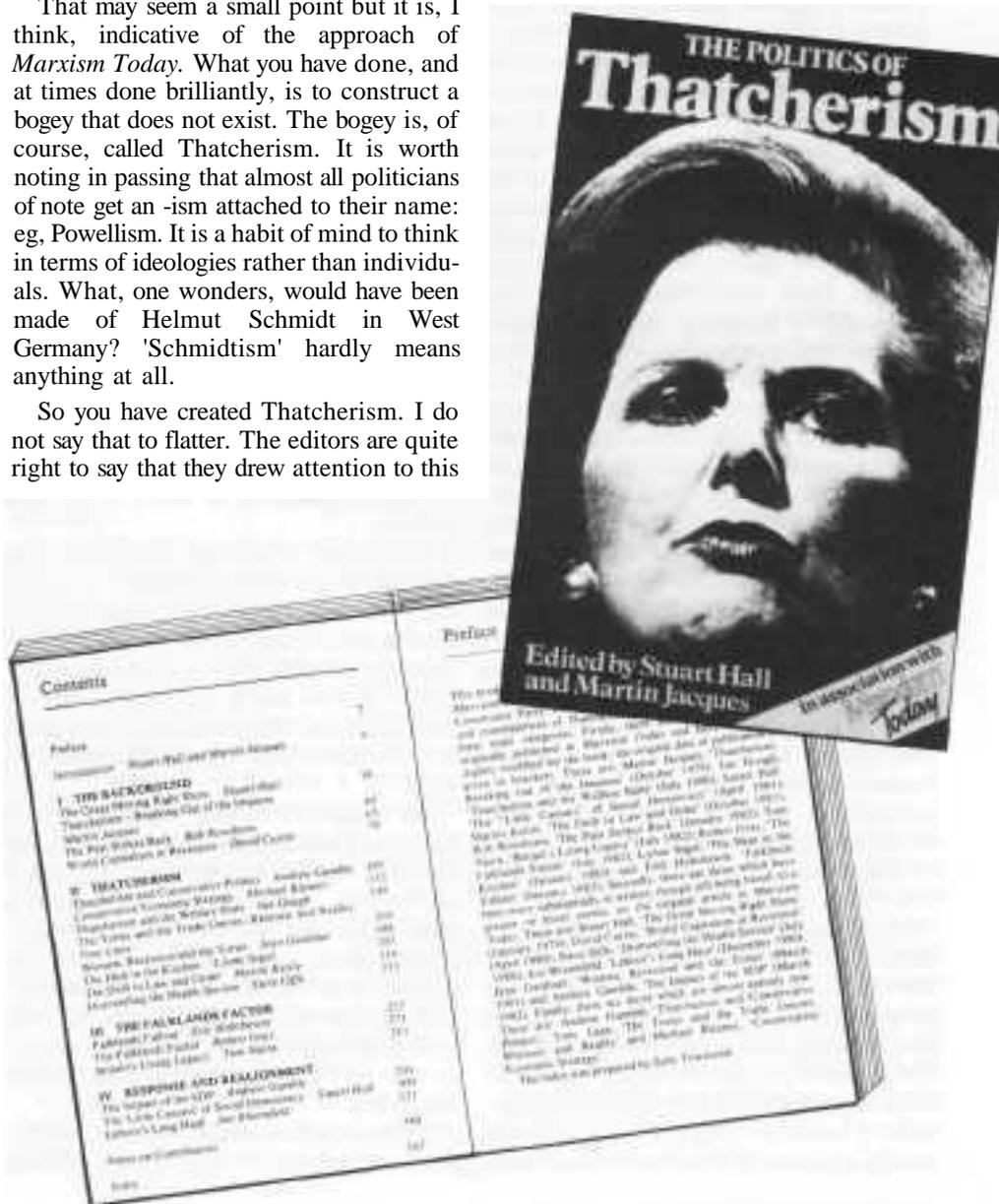
That may seem a small point but it is, I think, indicative of the approach of *Marxism Today*. What you have done, and at times done brilliantly, is to construct a bogey that does not exist. The bogey is, of course, called Thatcherism. It is worth noting in passing that almost all politicians of note get an -ism attached to their name: eg, Powellism. It is a habit of mind to think in terms of ideologies rather than individuals. What, one wonders, would have been made of Helmut Schmidt in West Germany? 'Schmidtism' hardly means anything at all.

So you have created Thatcherism. I do not say that to flatter. The editors are quite right to say that they drew attention to this

phenomenon long before anyone else, and it has become common parlance.

Yet in having created it you have made it sound both better and worse than it is. Thatcherism is endowed with a quality of intellectual consistency that can hardly have been observed in practice. Thus Andrew Gamble refers on page 127 to the 'social market strategy' of the Conservative Party, presumably a reference to the economic model worked out by a few German liberals in the 1930s and then applied by Ludwig Erhard. There are, in fact, very few British Conservatives who are even aware of the full extent of the German model, and allusions to it in Conservative writings and speeches are extremely rare. One of the few exceptions is Mr David Howell, and he has just been sacked from Mrs Thatcher's new Cabinet.

The Thatcherism that I have observed from watching the Prime Minister for four



years in office and for some time before is something quite different. Indeed it is touched on in the essay by David Currie when he refers to a 'conscious aim of withdrawing from involvement in industry, leaving it to market processes and the supposed incentives of lower taxation to restructure the economy.' He then adds: 'The practice has been rather different from this objective. In the event, the precipitate collapse of British industry has forced government to provide substantial funds to major sectors such as British Leyland and steel to ensure their continued survival: but such help has been piecemeal and has not formed part of a conscious overall strategy.'

Precisely. In industrial policy I do not think that the Government's behaviour has been much different from that of its predecessors. Andrew Gamble has a very good phrase when he says that the last two periods of Labour government were 'most notable for defensive management of short term crises.' It is puzzling why he does not apply that to Mrs Thatcher, for it is no less accurate a description. It is in a way just as much a crisis when the pound is going uncontrollably up as when it is going uncontrollably down, and one has detected very few improvements in economic management. In short, I believe that the authors have been bedazzled by the rhetoric into believing that much more fundamental changes are taking place than is in fact the case. If you looked at the economic indicators alone, and ignored the rhetoric, you would conclude that Britain's relative economic decline had continued under Mrs Thatcher much as before, despite being cushioned by the revenues from North Sea oil. Indeed in general there is a tendency to overuse the word 'crisis'. As often as not, for crisis I would substitute 'same old mess'.

There is another chronic giveaway in the belief in a certain inevitability of events. The cock-up theory of history is entirely overlooked. In practice, Mrs Thatcher became leader of the Tory Party by a series of accidents. If Edward Heath had not gone to the country in February 1974, he might well have been Prime Minister for much of the 1970s. If Mr William Whitelaw had stood against him in the first ballot, or even if the right wing challenge had been led by Sir Keith Joseph — as Mrs Thatcher originally wanted — she might never have been elected. And if James Callaghan had better timed the 1979 election the Tories might even have had new leadership problems. It seems to be a sound rule — not wholly regarded in these essays — never to

overlook the element of chance.

There are also ways in which the authors and Mrs Thatcher appear to have a certain amount in common. Thus Andrew Gamble refers to the Conservatives in the 1950s presiding over an 'economy comfortably afloat in the backwash created by the boom in the world economy.' It was precisely that complacency which Mrs Thatcher reacted against. Tories have their revisionists too. The Macmillan period would be almost written out of Mrs Thatcher's history of the Party, or at least the central figures would be consigned to disgrace.

Andrew Gamble writes again: 'Yet even if Thatcherism does collapse, the problem of Britain's economic decline will still be there. It will not mean that the social market strategy is dead or that it may not be revived at some time in the future. The kind of decline that Britain is now experiencing cannot go on indefinitely. At some point it will precipitate a crisis which will decisively alter the balance of forces in British politics.'

That sounds very like the thinking of Sir Keith Joseph. It is the theory of the precipice: sooner or later the decline becomes so sharp that the country falls over the cliff. But, of course, that is nonsense when expressed that way. Countries don't fall over cliffs. Decline can continue indefinitely. Look at other countries and other centuries. The interesting fact is that life goes on despite decline and that the continuation of the decline under Mrs Thatcher has been simply concealed by rhetoric. It might be more helpful to look for the explanation in fields other than politics.

Note, too, in passing the quote from Gramsci which is recommended by Stuart Hall to the Left: 'Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.' It is a splendid formula, but it seems to me to apply just as much to some forms of Toryism. Lord Hailsham would have loved it for himself, and Harold Macmillan as well.

We come now to some omissions. It is surprising that so little space is given to the nature of the electoral system and its effect on politics. The election produced a remarkable and not wholly unforeseeable result in giving only 23 seats to the Alliance on around 26% of the vote. Should not the Left itself be embracing electoral reform, even if only as a means of self-preservation? At the very least, the subject should be discussed.

There is also very little reference to what to me is one of the most striking

developments in recent years: that is the decline of internationalism. This is a very British book, almost as British as the Tory Party and as parochial as the Labour Party. There is almost no discussion of developments abroad or of the need to reform international institutions. Indeed Professor Hobsbawm in his otherwise distinguished essay almost dismisses out of hand consideration of an international solution for the Falklands. He prefers to see the Falklands war as a purely British phenomenon.

I do not think either that it is necessary to see any and every attempt to reform the law relating to the trade unions as an attack on the working class. Surely some reforms might actually be helpful: for example, a cooling off period in disputes. It cannot seriously be pretended that the present situation is satisfactory. Or perhaps it is so pretended, for what we have is silence.

There is an omission again on the possible benefits of structural change. It is happening in any case. It relieves drudgery. It can be life transforming. Yet there is a marked addiction in these essays to the old manufacturing industries. What one would like would be an examination of how change might be harnessed in a more humane direction. There might also be a search for some new definitions of such issues as full employment. Is it always going to be defined more or less as a forty hour, five day week more or less from leaving school to retirement at 60 or 65? After all, it used to be far longer and it was widely thought to be a reform when it was reduced. Has further advance been abandoned by the Left?

Not least, the question of financing the social services if there is to be little or no economic growth is an important one, even if the Tories have ducked it so far. One looks in vain for a socialist examination, or even for an acknowledgement that the problem exists.

Shortly after the election Mr Peter Shore appeared on television and said that Labour had 'lost the 1980s'. He added that in future he would be referring to the working classes not the working class. I think both remarks are profound. Labour has lost the 1980s and it is absurd to cling to the old terminology of the working class. As successive elections have shown it is diminishing as a force in politics and in society — a development that working people themselves have welcomed. This book, for all its merits, is not for the 1990s which is where the Left should now be looking.

**Malcolm Rutherford**