

IN THESE TIMES

by Geoff Mulgan, Robin Murray, Suzanne Moore and Judith Squires

There is a continuing debate on the nature of the restructuring that is taking place on a world scale.

Postmodernism, post-Fordism, globalisation... each analysis has both adherents and critics.

In These Times seeks to both engage with these schools of analysis, and also to aid the redrawing of our maps of the present in order to chart a politics of tomorrow.

Newest Times

By Geoff Mulgan

If one looks back to the *New Times* analysis of 1988, the first striking thing is how much has happened since. The collapse of communism, the Gulf war, a world with only one superpower and a fairly massive change in the global economic order, not to mention the end of both Reaganism and Thatcherism. There has been no attempt since then to synthesise a new world view, to integrate all these changes and thus the ambitions and achievements of *New Times* haven't been matched since its original publication five years ago!

Nevertheless, I see two weaknesses in *New Times*. Because Thatcherism was then at its peak there was not enough attention given to questions of ethics, of the civic, of the forces that bind society together. One of the great political challenges for the years ahead will be how to start reconstituting a sense of the collective, a sense of community, of mutual obligation, without it sounding like vague, empty rhetoric. The second weakness came from its academic origin; its views were detached from the lived life of society. So it became trapped in what Walter Benjamin described as 'peaceful negativity' – if you are outside you can criticise everything in absolute peace and in the knowledge that this won't upset the certainties of your own life. I believe that any political analysis or critique needs some engagement with the real tasks faced by institutions and people. This was the particular motivation behind the founding of Demos, the new think-tank which I am involved with. The aim was that

Demos should develop the programmatic side of *New Times*. It soon became clear however that such a project meant that we had to reach out to quite different intellectual resources compared to what we were used to using, using different kinds of people well beyond the traditional circles of the Left. We had to get involved with people from business, with people engaged in the day-to-day running of the public sector, with people working in the voluntary sector. As a catalyst for change we had to be seen to be detached from vested interests, and from political parties in particular. This



was especially true if we were to attract people under 30 who seem to be almost totally hostile now to an involvement in any political party.

Our analysis today relates to *New Times* in the sense that we are placing the current situation in the context not only of changes at the end of the last century and Fordism, but also in the origins of modern politics, created over 200 years ago by the French Revolution. The assembly of the French Revolution defined for the first time the notions of left and right, the ideas of rep-

resentative institutions and parliaments, of the state and parties. Three dimensions of this modern politics have since crumbled away: class, nation, and a notion of wholesale transformation. The class basis of politics has been corroded by a whole series of economic changes. The nation has been undermined by local interests as well as global ones – from Greenpeace to the United Nations. But above all it's the loss of that third dimension of politics, the division between clearly identified forces of progress, forces with the capacity to create a radically new society, and ranged against them forces of reaction. This notion disappeared with the events of 1989 and there are now no movements which really make that promise of transformation. In this vacuum we can see the failure of parliaments to generate workable strategies and of parties to attract members. Politics now takes place largely on TV. So if at the next General Election Tony Blair is able to smile better than an exhausted John Major, the conventional wisdom about the electoral arithmetic may be blown away. But this is a very superficial politics and is no longer linked into large structures which can act as a communication belt upwards from the people and downwards from the centres of power. We seem to have entered a period of dissolution and disillusion with political forms. There is no sign as yet of a political movement being able to fill this vacuum in a convincing way. That is the biggest difference between thinking about the *New Times* now and thinking about them back in 1988. This change is both frightening and at the same time the type of historic opportunity which only comes once in a number of generations.

Geoff Mulgan is the Director of the think-tank, Demos, and author of *Politics in an Anti-Political Age* (Polity Press, forthcoming).

From Post-Fordism to Neo-Fordism

By Robin Murray

Has the practice of post-Fordism changed markedly in the last five years, is it the dominant production mode, or are we witnessing a return to other forms such as unskilled labour? Is post-Fordism only an economic mode of organisation, or has it changed social patterns too? How should left politics deal with the challenge of post-Fordism? Are there some economic trends beyond post-Fordism likely to emerge in the near future? My view is that five years after the original formulations of the *New Times* theses it is as important to stress the continuities between Fordism and post-Fordism as the discontinuities.

Henry Ford was one of the first to develop ideas about deskilling labour and he transformed production by organising what came later to be called 'single product flow'. He wrote in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: 'There are three plain principles underlying mass production. First, the planned orderly progression of the commodity through the workshop. Second, the delivery of work, instead of leaving it to the workman's initiative to find it. Third, an analysis of the operation into its constituent parts.' This methodology was applied to shipbuilding, along with many other vital parts of industry and society in general. In terms of shipbuilding, in the past workers fitted everything on to one ship. The ship was in the centre of operations by the workers. The Japanese in 1945 decided to apply Henry Ford's ideas to shipbuilding and create a production line. Within 30 years, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders and many others were gone. Britain used to have 50% of the world shipbuilding market, by 1970 we were left with about 5% whereas the Japanese in the same period had grown from a 5% to around a 50% market share. The new system was mass producing ships using single product flow. It meant that there had to be a single design of ship, just like Henry Ford's car. And this methodology has been applied in sector after sector.

The founders of Toyota said that these methods were too limited because in essence you could only have one

model of car, ship or whatever. They sought the advantages of the Ford flow system but wanted to be able to produce many different types of car. This resulted in 'multi-product flow' and was Toyota's answer to the post-war challenge of choice. The model was inspired by Toyota's visit to an American supermarket! Considering that each car has some 32,000 constituent parts such a transformation of production was no mean feat and it took Toyota 30 years to finally perfect it. Coordinating production to this degree needed a remarkable concentration of energy. But then electronics and computerisation began to emerge and the systemic changes not only drastically accelerated but could now be applied to a whole new range of sectors.

Toyota's next target is the construction industry, where for the last 15 years they have been trying to apply to buildings what they have already applied so successfully to car production. In Japan you can now go to a Toyota salesperson, design your own house, the salesperson presses a button and you will get a printout of the design, complete with customisation, colour coding and costing. Within 3 weeks the completed building is delivered.

An important aspect in all of this is the socialisation of consumption and production. Manufacturing in some senses has become like a service. 'Tell me what you want and I will make it for you'. This results in endless surveys and market questionnaires. The consumer has to be internalised within the production process.

Knowledge and organisation are central to modern production. One must have knowledge to carry out planning. But the idea that knowledge can be centralised has collapsed. Now, information is kept as far down the production process as possible so that workers can utilise it to carry out particular kinds of work. In this regard it is important to note the amount of resources big business will spend in developing the most effective organisational theories.

Finally, it is vital to understand the depth of the embedding of production

systems in particular social systems. This is clearest in Japan where the entire social system is articulated around time economy dictated by the production process. In effect this means that the separation between culture and economics becomes redundant. In this sense the *New Times* analyses remain as important today as five years ago. We have to find ways of redefining the whole economic project so that it becomes one of determining the quality of life rather than fulfilling centralised quantitative targets. It is this which would open the way to democratising and re-connecting economics, reaching out to both everyday life and the political process as it seeks to effect change.

Robin Murray is an economist and Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies.



Faith, Hope and Identity

By Suzanne Moore

If the *New Times* analysis hailed a brave new world, it was the world of postmodernism, post-communism, post-feminism and post-Fordism. What *New Times* did very well was to register the breakdown of class narratives, the old oppositions of left and right, and replaced them with a model that incorporated some of the fluidity of change. This new world that it conjured up was chaotic, aspirational and full of fleeting identities. So one minute you're a mother, the

next you're a consumer, then you're a voter. This confusion of identities speaks to people in a way that to say 'You're working class' no longer does. It was appealing because like so much of postmodern theory it seemed to describe the way it actually feels to live now, to be consistently confused, to feel like you are living in someone else's film script. In this great shopping mall of postmodernism we could all be consumers, all go shopping, and all be shiny happy people at play. That was all very appealing but it worked on the basis that all identities are equal, which is questionable, because some identities are still much more equal than others. The failures of the *New Times* analysis correspond with the failures inherent within postmodern theory. I'm suspicious about postmodernism's supposed all-purpose nature, its become like some sort of super glue. If you want a theory that starts off talking about architecture and ends up talking about the universe, well as they say at Burger King, 'You want it, you got it'. While talking about the end of any grand narratives postmodernism is itself a grand narrative. It's all the things that it says aren't happening anymore.

The theory itself of course is not inherently left or right-wing, it's just about ideas, but many of the conclusions lend themselves more to a right-wing agenda than to a left-wing one. Fukuyama's 'End of History' thesis is a postmodern idea, but one of the right. So the question is how do you make any sort of political analysis at a time when Baudrillard tells us that it's the 'End of the social'? If you've done away with the social or collective how do you have any kind of politics? Essentially the problem is that postmodernism isn't, and doesn't claim to be, a social theory, but it is used as one. It is a theory of aesthetics of culture, and thus to claim it as a socio-political theory is very problematic.

Can you have a politics based on identity? Well obviously, yes and no. Clearly the old identifications of labour, class and trade unions don't hold much sway anymore. What we were talking about in their place was a kind of rainbow coalition where all kinds of interest groups could come together, if only for a while. This is the ideal of identity politics. But of course the trouble with identity politics is that some people will feel that their identity is much more real than everyone else's identity. You end up with an easily parodied hierarchy of oppres-

sions that are competing for the very questionable status of victimhood. This is not about empowering people, it's about becoming the ultimate victim.

The current state of feminism exemplifies the limitations of identity politics. Feminism is now a kind of imagined community because it is everywhere but nowhere. It has no centre, no organisation, no leaders. There is no 'womens movement' we can speak of in any clear way, yet for many women to identify themselves as feminists is a radical step. What has happened is that feminism has become a kind of cultural politics with no substantive base. It has become possible to live in a vacuum where you can be a feminist who only goes to see plays by women, only reads books by women, only sees films with strong female characters, and who lives in a kind of womens culture. But what is this achieving? It might have been motivated in the first place by politics but as it is lived now it seems almost entirely detached from politics.

In this context the phrase 'identity politics' has become a code for consumption. You can be a consuming feminist, consuming feminist things. Consumption becomes the identity. I shop, therefore I am. It was one thing to deny the pleasures of consumption – as much of the old left did – but it's another thing entirely to offer them up as some sort of revolutionary act.

In this sense lesbian and gay politics is interesting because lesbians and gay men have had to form an identity out of a sexual act in order to fight for their rights. In some ways which bits of your body you rub against bits of someone else's body is not in itself an identity, but a homosexual identity has been created out of this. My point is that identity is always strategic. Those who have less power have to create identities as a basis on which to fight. Just having an identity is not in itself radical.

The promise of the *New Times* analysis was of a pluralism of different interest groups replacing the old hard lines of class politics. But where is it now? Identity politics has to connect with the real, often unexciting world of collective politics, it has to have some sort of base and it has to make alliances. But these alliances don't have to be for ever, they can be 'one night stands'. Nor can the idea of alliances be considered in itself intrinsically good. We have to look at what these kinds of alliances might be for. on the other hand identity must hold

on to the idea that it's always strategic and not some essential truth. Identity almost always has to be tongue in cheek. Those who are entirely sure about their identities are the people we should fear. We have to hold on to a much looser idea. So we have to anchor this free-floating desire for change in a way that doesn't weigh it down. Identity politics will fail if it becomes about finding oneself. It has to be about finding other people.

Suzanne Moore is a columnist and feature writer for *The Guardian*. A collection of her essays, *Looking for Trouble* was published by Serpents Tail in 1991.



Post-modern Paralysis

By Judith Squires

Traumatic political events have rendered old certainties obsolete and an anxious new search has begun for theoretical frameworks with which to understand and engage with these developments.

It is in this context that we must ask whether a postmodern perspective can do the required work. Whether the political imagination stirred by postmodernism is one which can accommodate theories of morality and justice, whether it can provide a basis from which to adjudicate between competing moral claims and political demands

For it is by no means clear that it can. The theories of postmodernity have

worked to problematise the role of morals and undermine our certainty in values, denying the assumed objectivity and certainty of previous bases for ethical judgment. Lacking clear transcendental or empirical foundations for our ethical codes and political commitments, we are left to choose between the 'dangerous quietism' of nihilistic abandon and the 'complacent consensus' of ironic pragmatism.

The destruction of old frameworks has been both liberating and democratising. But it has also been debilitating. Changed social realities and altered theoretical states have both worked to undermine the basis for political interventions, moral judgments and critical comment.

We need to recognise that we have gone as far as we can in the spiral of infinite regress which is skeptical anti-foundationalism. We are now witnessing a wary attempt to look back at what we left behind, and begin to reclaim some of its strengths.

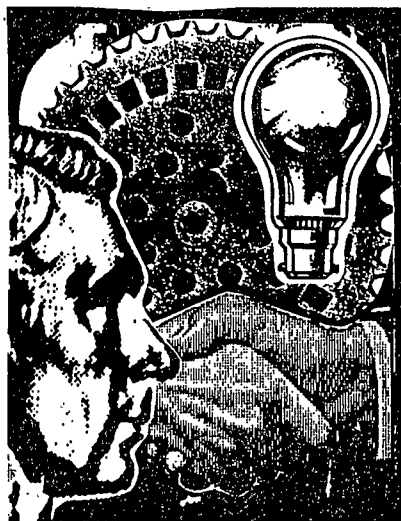
The theoretical responses to the postmodern condition have become fairly uniform, involving three key features. First, the rejection of essentialism. Second, the rejection of homogeneity. Third, the rejection of the pursuit of absolute truth. In the place of these illusory ideals we find the assertion that the subject is a social, historical or linguistic artifact; the celebration of fragmentation and difference; the acceptance of the contingent and apparent. The result is that commitments to theoretical justifications of emancipatory projects have been undermined. Any application of the concept of social justice becomes problematic.

The paradox of most commonly held postmodern positions is that its epistemological project is to deflate all universalistic efforts to theorise about justice, and yet its practical project is to generate effective resistance to the present dangers of universalising processes in society. The trouble with deconstructing grand narratives in theory is that the existing systematic power imbalances do not dissipate along with them.

Many who claim to advocate the impossibility of all certainties, who celebrate difference, who reject emancipatory discourses are disingenuous. For to engage in theory, to recognise the position from which theorising is possible, is to accept the existence of certain power structures. For most of those who currently engage in a deconstruction of the

claimed purity of theorising do so not only from a position of relative privilege, but also in the name of marginalised groups.

The postmodern engagements in fragmentation and differentiation have a quite serious purpose. They disrupt and erode the power of normalising discourses, they clear the space for discourses of difference. But if these discourses of difference are to be articulated within a framework of justice then a postmodern politics must be concerned with concrete structures of power and normative expressions of value. There is a gulf between a theory which claims to

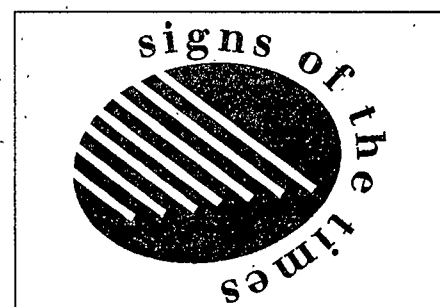


be value-free and a practice which is concerned with emancipatory goals.

The call for 'principled positions', for the reassertion of values, is the beginning of the long road from deconstruction to reconstruction. This reconstruction must challenge the common postmodern assumption that the rejection of absolutism and essentialism leads to moral paralysis. The fear, of course, is that we end up committing ourselves to some universally agreed norms of morality. And the infinite regress of universalist and absolutist argument immediately looms. As does, in the other direction, the relative ease of deconstruction of any notion of social justice as meaning anything whatsoever. But this polarity is only a threat if we insist on adopting a strong form of postmodernism; on constructing an absolute opposition between objectivism and relativism. Yet there is an alternative form of postmodernism, which acknowledges the challenges to old certainties, but does not undermine the possibility of normative criticism. This is what has been called a 'weak' or 'soft skeptical' form of postmodernism which posits an

embedded rather than a purely fictive subject. It involves the rejection, not of all macro-narratives, but only of essentialist and monocausal grand narratives. And, rather than rejecting all notions of truth and reality, it addresses the empirical conditions under which communities of interpretation generate validity claims. This perspective represents a synthetic approach; giving up on the idea of a grand narrative without giving up on the idea of truth as a regulative ideal; accepting as unjust the limiting and partial forms which evaluation and judgment has taken and can take, without denying the possibility of evaluation in general. For this we need to find a new type of articulation between the universal and the particular; a common normative standard by which we can come to terms with different ways of life. This demands that we balance a theoretical rejection of essentialism, objectivism and universalism with a moral and political commitment to non-oppressive, democratic and pluralistic values. What we are demanding is a politics which could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves, and still be faithful to the humanist politics of emancipatory projects.

Judith Squires is a Lecturer in Political Theory at Bristol University and editor of the journal *New Formations*. She has recently edited a collection of essays for Lawrence and Wishart, *Principled Positions* which deal with postmodernism and values.



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