

Time and motion shaped the 20th century. But ROBIN MURRAY finds that teamwork is shaping the 21st.
Illustration by GEOFF GRANDFIELD

How what was good for Ford turned bad

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IN THE 1890s Frederick Winslow Taylor of the Bethlehem Steel Company began to publicise his new philosophy of management — taking the skill out of work, setting target times for individual operations, and paying bonuses to those who achieved them. This was the start of time and motion study and of the scientific management movement.

Taylor and his fellow engineers were called upon to reorganise not only private and public industry, but municipal government, hospitals and universities. Weekly magazines were published applying Taylor's principles to housework. Scientific management became a dominant philosophy for Teddy Roosevelt's progressives, and for his son's reorganisation of New Deal administration in the late 1930s. Henry Ford adopted Taylor's principle of timed tasks, and added to it the idea of timing, the need for a synchronised flow between operations. Together they set out a philosophy of production and organisation which shaped a century.

The system that emerged — based on mass production, and a strict division between technical and manual labour — was being called, by the 1920s, Americanism or Fordism. It was embraced not just by the newly-emerging large-scale manufacturers, but also by social democrats and by Bolsheviks. It represented Modernism in its economic form.

Not until the late 1960s did doubts about this model come out into the open — in California as much as in Paris, in Turin as in Prague. On the Left, the focus of opposition was on Fordism's separation of conception and execution — and the deskilling of manual labour. Later, what was to become the Green movement questioned Fordism's assumptions on scale, on centralisation, and on its gargantuan appetite for natural resources. There were equally doubts among managers, particularly those working in new technology sectors where Taylor's doctrines seemed particularly inappropriate.

Now, in the 1990s — in the management world at least — these doubts are on the way to becoming a new orthodoxy. The spark has been the continuing competitive decline of the centres of old Fordism — North America and Britain — and the success of Japan, Germany, and parts of Italy and Scandinavia, where a quite different productive model is in place. American and British

Production lines

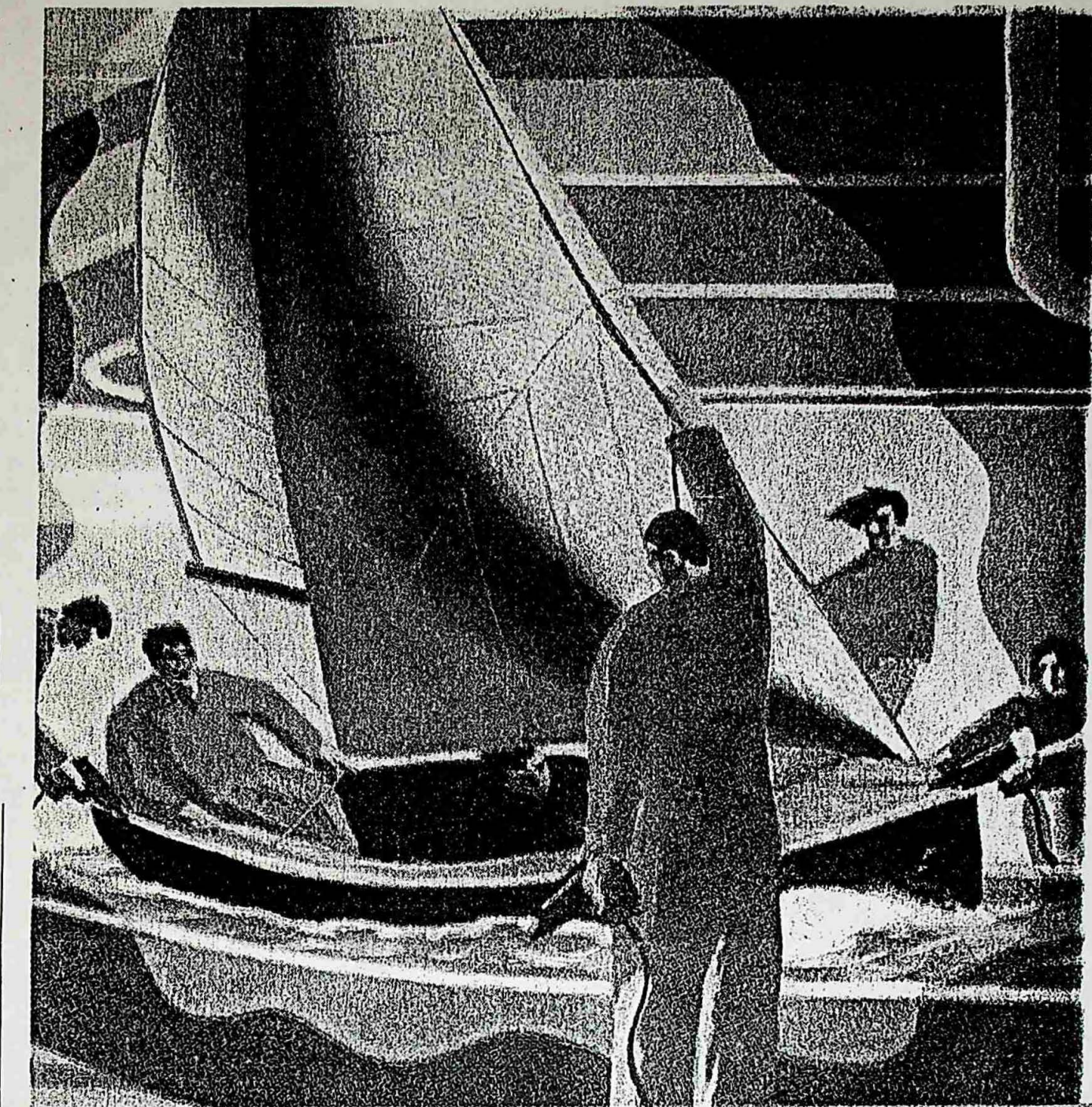
Towards a New Economic Order: Postfordism, Ecology and Democracy, by Alain Lipietz (Polity Press, £11.95 pbk)

managers are now turning to the East, adopting the Japanese catchwords — "Just in Time", "total quality" and "continuous improvement" — and applying an Anglo-Saxon reading of the new model with as much enthusiasm as their predecessors introduced the ideas of Taylor.

What is striking is how little impact the critique of Fordism has had on economic policy in the Fordist countries, both on the Right and the Left. In the UK and the US, the Right has been preoccupied with markets. The Left — suspicious of Japan and the new managerialism — have focused on the traditional planks of social democratic economic policy: redistribution, social ownership and Keynesian macro regulation. They have continued to sideline issues of production, because, like the Right, they see no alternative to the Fordist version.

The merit of Alain Lipietz's book is that it takes us to the heart of these issues. Lipietz is one of France's best known radical economists. He is also an active red-green politician. In 1988, he stood for the Greens in the presidential elections against Mitterrand, and is now a member of the Paris regional council in which the Greens hold the balance of power. The current book is a translation of *Choisir de l'Audace*, prepared for the 1989 local and European elections.

LIPPIETZ, true to the spirit of May 1968, is an anti-Taylorist. He argues that Taylorism can no longer deliver the key elements of modern competition — productivity, innovation and quality. The new competition requires a skilled and committed workforce, and this can only be achieved through a change in the social compromise between capital and labour. Lipietz dislikes the socially divisive Japanese version of this compromise, preferring the Swedish one, which he calls *Kalmarism*, after Volvo's Kalmar plant which gave workers substantial autonomy on the line. But



whatever the version, all the successful industrial economies are marked by their rejection of Taylorism and the negotiated consent of a core manual and technical labour force.

Lipietz suggests that the Reagan-Thatcher policies have failed because they have helped to intensify Taylorism — in industry and the state — in a post-Taylor age, at the same time as "Brazilianising" their societies by dismantling the key institutions on which classical Fordism was based — the welfare state, labour protection legislation and nationally negotiated wage agreements.

Their international policies have been likewise repressive. Having failed industrially, the US and the UK are now trying to undercut the welfare compromises of their neighbours through the North American Free Trade Area, in the US case, and through resistance to the EC social chapter in the case of the British. They are also using their military power as an export earner.

The lead is being taken by the US, which is redefining its world role as part *condottiere* and part civiliser of the South, and calling on non-combatants to fund its troops. This is Lipietz's interpretation of the Gulf war, from which the US received contributions of \$41 billion in foreign exchange — 5 to 8 months of its trade deficit.

Lipietz is similarly critical of the welfare Keynesianism of the Fordist Left. This has also failed to address the changes in

production, let alone globalisation, so that socialist governments, once in power, have too often been forced into a softer version of neo-liberalism. (It was the barrenness of what he calls the liberal productivity of the Left governments in France in the 1980s which led him to join the Greens.)

The main part of the book is about his alternative. It starts with the need for an anti-Taylorist re-organisation of work. He then suggests that post-Taylorist work needs to be accompanied by a change in consumption. Keynes and social democracy emphasised the quantity of consumption.

The issue now is quality, and particularly the quality of living. For the majority of the first world, the problem is not a lack of *having* but a lack of *being*. We need to move, he says, to a society focused on leisure rather than on the consumption of commodities.

This involves attention to the environment, to the protection of nature and to the replanning of cities. It also involves the reduction of working hours. Like Andre Gorz and a growing number of continental writers, Lipietz sees the growth of free time as a central focus for any new political economy. It implies, he says, a real cultural revolution, when, in Gorz's terms, workers will take their share of increases in productivity in free time rather than higher wages.

A cut in working hours will also address the other central problem — persistent unem-

ployment. In France, a cut from 39 to 35 hours a week would create a million extra jobs over five years. We need to think of a redistribution of work as an instrument for the redistribution of income. But more is needed, and here Lipietz introduces the idea of a third sector — neither market nor state — geared to producing socially useful products. Like a number of Third World schemes, it would offer a job for all at the minimum wage — paid partly by the government from the funds they would anyway pay to the unemployed and partly by the new third sector agencies.

These are the elements of Lipietz's new social compromise. There is much to be worked on.

He scarcely touches the implications of post-Fordism for tax, the form of money, the household or the state. His sections on ecology, democracy and decentralisation are little more than sketches. All will need to be developed if his most challenging idea — that of the third sector — is to go beyond our experience of building dry stones walls under the Community Programme.

In post Black Wednesday Britain, it is not Lipietz's answers but his questions that are important. Here is a new agenda for a Left seeking to go beyond welfare Keynesianism. There is also an unaccustomed optimism.

This stems partly from the

political resonance of these post-Fordist themes in France. (In the 1992 regional elections, the Greens, lighting on a Lipietzian platform, won control of Nord Pas de Calais, and gained 14 per cent of the national total vote, well ahead of the Communists, and not far behind the socialists). But it is also rooted in the fact that Lipietz and his colleagues in the French regulation school are constructing a theory, explanatory and suggestive, which returns economics from its preoccupation with markets to where it should be — our work, our lives and the future of our societies...

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