

New Times revisits the debate on post-Fordism and considers how the organisational form has influenced Britain's Labour Party, amongst others.

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You made a big contribution to the post-Fordist debate. Post-Fordism links organisational forms and social periods, in other words it suggests that there is a connection between the way people decide to organise themselves and the historical period in which they are living.

Certainly there are striking similarities between economic and social organisations in the Fordist period. We are all familiar with the organisation of mass production factories: large flow lines, worked by semi-skilled workers, with design, planning and operational coordination separated off under the control of centralised management. What is interesting is how these principles can be found in other social institutions, like giant mental hospitals or schools, ever larger units of local government and flow lines in self service cafeterias.

You talk of similarities between the private sector and other parts of the social economy. Is there a causal link?

This is more difficult. Consider the state, I used to think that there was an autonomous public sector history, centred on the armed forces. A lot of the earliest Fordist forms can be observed in the armed services (and in the factories producing goods supplied to the armed services like guns and marching boots) because of the particular character of the military production process. The organisational structures which emerge from, say, the Prussian army, worked their way into the civilian state, much of which was staffed by retired soldiers. This is the model that sociologist Max Weber experienced in turn of the century Germany — the model that became the dominant one for the 20th century public sector just as scientific management was dominant in the private sphere. Interestingly Weber wrote at the same time as FW Taylor, who founded the scientific management movement. Weber visited America at the time of the sudden growth of Taylor's movement, and saw it as a parallel sign of the rationalisation of all administration. One of the best known early management theorists, Henri Fayol, derived many of his ideas from the French post office.

On the other hand, in 19th century America at least — it seems that the innovations in corporate organisation preceded the reorganisational drives in the public sphere. Taylor and his followers were in demand in many parts of the US state — from city government to education, environmental management and health. Taylor's assistant Morris Cooke, another engineer, made proposals for the Ivy League universities in 1910 which are strikingly parallel to current Tory policy — though more human. Consultants, of course, have been one transmission belt, but there has also been the steady stream of private sector managers being brought in to reorganise the state, like Robert Macnamara who came from Ford to the US Department of Defence and then to the World Bank. So the movement goes both ways. There is also a shared 'way of seeing' — a celebration of the machine as image in art as much as in organisation, and an affirmation of many of the

Enlightenment themes — notably of rationality and universality.

I was going to ask you whether in fact many of the characteristics you assign to Fordism do not have a longer tradition?

Yes, I am sure that is so. Napoleon's educational system is a good example. What marks the period of 20th century mass production, however, is that those ideas achieve a material dominance that shape a whole range of collective institutions, public and private, and create a new 'common sense' that was shared by both left and right. Of course this common sense and the organisational model it implied was contested, with varying success depending on place, and people, and the sphere of economy.

What do you mean by the 'sphere of economy'?

If you take the household sphere, for example, there were attempts to introduce Taylorism even here — through things like time and motion studies, domestic science teaching, articles on scientific management in housework in women's magazines. But these ideas made much less headway there than in the market economy, because of people's resistance to the rationalisation of personal life. The state was somewhere in between. In the public sector it proved harder to realise the full Fordist organisational model partly because many of the tasks of the welfare state, notably the caring services, were seen as the socialisation of household functions, with the accompanying ethos. Partly, too, the absence of the market meant that public sector labour was more insulated from the pressures of deskilling and job fragmentation than workers in the private sector.

The neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s have tried to change all that. They have cast public sector care workers as self-interested professionals and have sought to use the market, and an archaic form of private sector management ideology, as a form of labour discipline. At the same time — by challenging the old state bureaucratic model — they have opened up new spaces for which there is no private sector organisational blueprint.

You earlier suggested that the left shared a Fordist common sense. What do you mean by that?

We should remember that many of the political institutions of the left were formed at the very time when Taylorism and then Fordism were being introduced in the industrial field. Many of the features of Fordist organisation were accepted as the best, indeed the only effective way of doing things, and therefore as politically progressive.

A commitment to large scale is presumably one example.

Yes. Another is the accepted division between mental and manual labour. Just as Taylor wanted to remove thinking and initiative from the manual workers and concentrate it in management, so there are strong elements of intellectual vanguardism in Marxist and social democratic political thought throughout Europe.

In Bolshevik economics the link is explicit. Both Lenin and Trotsky were fascinated by Taylor. They promoted his ideas not as an instrument of control over labour (that came later) but as an instrument for the organisation of production. The whole idea of 'one man management' and Soviet planning presumed the viability of a centralised knowledge and the efficacy of instructions based on plans



A CONSUMPTION LINE IN A TOKYO RESTAURANT. A chef minimise the number of uneaten dishes. When the restaurant catering version of Toyota's multi-product car assembly line

derived from that knowledge. Ford, who was one of the great heroes of the early Soviet Union, was himself a great centralist and nearly went bankrupt as a result. But the Bolsheviks out-Fordised Ford. You could say that the failures of the Soviet economic (and political) model are as much a failure of Fordism as a model for economic organisation as they are of the idea of a socialist economy per se.

One can see similar traditions in social democracy. I am thinking here of the Fabians.

The Webbs are particularly interesting here — aware of Taylor on the one hand and sharing that common sense, and at the same time full of admiration for the Soviet model. It would be interesting to explore how the imagery of mass produc-

Labour's Ford

"The social democratic tradition in Britain has always been against monopoly in the economy, but supports an electoral system which favours monopoly in the political field."





your belt takes dishes past the eaters who pick the dish they want. The chef on the right adjusts production according to demand on the line, aiming always to keep the line adjusted to go round the back of the room. Customers pay according to the number (and colour) of empty plates in their pile. This is the chef's. Photos: Courtesy Robin Murray

tion is carried over into thinking about politics and political organisation at this time. I am thinking here of the emergence of the idea of the mass — mass members, and mass meetings for example — and of the political machine. It was the Austrian social democrat Joseph Schumpeter who saw the stuff of democratic politics as the competition between machine parties for political leadership.

I have often been struck by the strength of the mechanical image in Labour Party thinking, not just in terms of machine politics, but in the idea of machines being the neutral instruments for carrying out other people's plans. There is a deep instrumentalism.

Yes. But this instrumentalism generates

from political power. He referred to the concession in principle of sovereign powers to the delegates at the annual conference and the removal in practice of most of this sovereignty through the trade union block vote and the complete independence of the PLP. In this sense the party constitution represents tensions rather than resolves them. Crossman also, incidentally, drew a parallel between the law of increasing oligarchy in the main political parties, and that which operated in industry, unions and Fleet Street. For many years we all thought these laws were irreversible, but trends in industrial and many social organisations suggest that this is not the case.

What does this mean for the Labour Party?

ages learning among all its members.

The Labour Party is still preoccupied with a particular form of centralised political power, rather than engaging in the many diffused arenas of power, notably in the cultural field. We could say it is more concerned with the mechanics of the distribution of power within its own organisation, than with the production of power, apart from winning elections. The language is still that of 'taking power' or capturing it, as though power was a concentrated substance. We need rather to think of creating power through forms of association, and qualities of organisation and culture.

Do you see the Labour Party reforming itself in this way?

It is very hard for an old Fordist party to

industrial organisations owed much to the exercise of political power by the already powerful rather than reflecting a technological imperative.

The telephone system, for example, was organised as a federation of local and regional telephone companies in Scandinavia (and still is in Finland) because of a particular political history, and the same is true in other industries we have come to think of as necessarily centralised like energy, finance and retailing. It is not a question of small scale versus large scale, but how systems of industrial (or political) organisations are formed and controlled.

I can see this as a point of entry to questions of industrial democracy. Discussions of industrial, like political democracy are at something of an impasse because the question of democracy is separated off from the material conditions of production and its organisation. This has been the problem with self management in former Yugoslavia. A friend of mine, involved in the reorganisation of the furniture industry in Slovenia, found that large mass production factories were trying to encourage industrial democracy among deskilled workers who simply wanted to get home as early as possible. They had no human stake in the plants beyond earning their wage. Only when work itself is transformed is there a base for an adequate industrial democracy.

Can we see a similar link between material conditions and forms of political democracy?

This is an interesting question. It may be that the experience of guerilla armies is instructive here. The Vietnamese or Frelimo armies had to maintain the support of the base, otherwise they lost their lives. They were subject to a kind of daily democracy.

Was this not also true of Cuba? When Castro and Guevara landed there in 1957, the form of organisation they had to adopt was determined by the fact that they had no supply lines. They had to build new supply lines and that meant dealing with some autonomy in power and building a certain relationship with people at the bottom of the organisation.

Exactly that. But once these movements took over central government, they became prisoners of the old administrative model, and the relations between the leadership and the citizens were transformed.

I was recently in Eritrea, where the EPLF have just won a 30 year war against the Ethiopians who were backed first by American and then Soviet power. They won not because their army was differently structured to the Ethiopians, but because of the quality of the human relationships within the Front — notably in respect to ethnicity and class — and between the Front and the civilian population.

Now, four months after independence, you can see the pressures that there are to establish a traditional form of Western government, with a hierarchical bureaucracy, departmentalism, formal qualifications, pay and pension inequality, centralised budgeting and taxation, all legitimised through periodic elections. Such qualification requirements would rule out many of those who have so successfully run the liberated zones. Centralised taxation would weaken the discipline to which the Front was subject when it depended on the daily voluntary support of the peasantry.

Central budgeting would turn the focus of government to centralised distribution and away from the key front line units who won the war and who were involved in every tactical decision affecting them. The challenge for the EPLF is how to translate its successful lessons in the field to a new form of administration of civilian government.

It is from these kind of experiences that we can learn the limits of our own categories of thinking.

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its own problems because it is clear to everyone that the 'neutral instruments' — whether they be state bureaucrats, industrial managers or party bosses — have a life of their own, indeed they may be the main locus of power. Schumpeter's answer in the political field was to say that there was a clear division of labour, between leaders and led, and whether the led were electors or rank and file workers in the political parties, their job was to leave the thinking and the leadership to those they had elected.

The problem for social democratic parties, of course, was that rank and file activists were unwilling to be treated as the political equivalent of Ford workers. They wanted, and still want, to be part of an active political culture with a say in what the leadership stands for on the hustings and what it does in power. As Dick Crossman long ago pointed out, the Labour Party constitution was designed to maintain enthusiasm of the rank and file by apparently creating a full party democracy while actually excluding them

What I have called Fordist organisations have steep hierarchies, weak horizontal links at the base, they get clogged up with information in their internal workings and their focus is on what goes on at the centre around policy and power. They are what organisation theorists called closed systems. The outside world is treated as in part composed of hostile competing organisations, and partly as a neutral arena to be sold to, campaigned in, won over and monitored.

Many of today's innovative organisations — and they are only the modern form of a much longer tradition of association — have more flexible and decentralised internal structures. They put a prime emphasis on cooperative relations with external bodies, and on strong interactive relations between front line workers and the wider community (in the Labour Party's case between party workers and the electorate). They also attach as much importance to the culture of the organisation as to its structure, and to the degree to which the organisation encour-

restructure itself from within. On the continent where there is proportional representation that renovation is quicker. In Germany and Denmark for example the political systems have provided a framework for new progressive organisations to achieve electoral recognition, prompting change in both policy and organisation in the traditional social democratic parties. The social democratic tradition in Britain has always been against monopoly in the economy, but supports an electoral system which favours monopoly in the political field.

You have talked as though the left has been imprisoned by what you call the common sense of Fordism, as if it was an ideology. How is it possible to think beyond the prison? Partly historically, by seeing how this common sense was formed, and contested in many fields of organisation. The early years of the century are particularly important here, for it is not always realised how the emergence of large