

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE NEW LEFT AND ITS SUCCESSORS, OR: WHO'S OLD-FASHIONED NOW?

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1956, 1968 and 1989: these are, on any conventional reckoning, major milestones in the odyssey of the post-war Western Left. They are likely to figure as epochal moments in any typical history: from Khrushchev's 'secret' speech at the 20th Party Congress and the invasion of Hungary, through the 'revolution' of May '68, to the collapse of Communism and the destruction of the Berlin Wall; from a 'New Left' seeking a third way beyond Stalinism and social democracy, through anti-war and student movements, Western Maoism, Eurocommunism and the new social movements, to the politics of identity and discourse; from a **socialist**-humanist Marxism, through Althusserianism, post-structuralism and post-Marxism, to post-modernism and beyond.

The narrative of formative episodes in the biography of the Western Left is generally situated in the context of another, over-arching history: the rise of 'welfare' and 'consumer' capitalism bringing the 'masses' and specifically the working class under its hegemonic spell, the changing structure (or in some versions, the virtual disappearance) of the working class, the consequent decline of working class militancy (not to mention the failure of even an 'economistically' militant proletariat to fulfill its historic mission as the agent of a socialist revolution), and hence the increasing separation of left intellectuals from the labour movement or, indeed, any political movement at all.

Where, then, does the New Left belong in this story? Its historical coordinates are clear enough: at least in Britain, it emerged at the point where the anti-Stalinist revulsion after 1956 converged with the rise of 'welfare' and 'consumer' capitalism, which seemed to give a new importance to cultural struggle. Histories of the New Left have further broken down this formation into two more or less distinct generations, a 'first' and a 'second' New Left, the latter **more** distant than the former from traditional forms of activism and class politics, more unambiguously committed to purely intellectual and cultural practice.' Nevertheless, the era of the second New Left was also a period in which the long-term secular decline

of socialist militancy and even class struggle seemed to be undergoing a reversal. The late sixties and early seventies appeared to be a decade of renewal, with dramatic outbreaks of student rebellion, a resurgence of working class militancy and even hopes of socialist revolution, associated with a resurgence of radical thought, including a revival of revolutionary **Marxism** by the second generation of the New Left in Britain.

Yet this period of resurgence was in turn followed by an equally dramatic era of 'retreat', a decisive, and many would say irremediable, decline of the labour movement, and a corresponding shift among left intellectuals. Looking back from the vantage point of the post-Communist era, historians of the Western Left are likely to see this retreat as a resumption, if not a completion, of the longer secular downturn of working class politics. In many if not most scenarios, the working class has taken its final exit, replaced by a plurality of agencies and struggles in the 'new social movements', and finally a shift from these movements to the 'politics of identity'. Agencies still attached to a broad emancipatory project have now given way to new forms of particularism or outright despair. Seen from this angle, the collapse of Communism is not only a world-historic episode in the history of the Left since the decline of Stalinism. It is also a climactic moment in the history of capitalism, the extension of its hegemony beyond its own long-standing borders to a 'new world order', which must – according not only to right-wing observers but to increasing numbers on the left – surely sweep away any residues of the old 'essentialist', 'reductionist' and 'totalizing' project of traditional socialism that may have survived in the New Left and its successors.

In these accounts, then, the history of Western left intellectuals from the fifties through the eighties appears to be one long story of reactive adjustments to changes of directions in working class politics, culminating in (at least according to some versions of this story) the more or less final triumph of capitalism. After a brief renewal of both working class militancy and Marxist theory, the process set in train by 'Western Marxism' has moved on, beyond the early philosophical and cultural responses to the failure of proletarian revolutions and Stalinist deformations, ending in a final and complete accommodation by the Left to the realities of capitalist advance and working class retreat.

I want to suggest a different periodization. In this one, the logic of intellectual trends on the left since the sixties is not so directly connected to working class politics. It has to do with some major epochal transformations and also with the sociology of the academy. In this alternative periodization, the rupture between the first and second New Left is a pivotal – or at least symptomatic – moment; and my chronology brings into sharper focus the depth of that rupture, as well as the significant continuities between the second New Left and what went after, up to and including

today's most current fashions. Finally, the implication of this alternative chronology is that the first New Left is not only more genuinely oppositional and emancipatory than the current intellectual and political fashions but in some respects also more current.

I

The term 'New Left' has been applied to a fairly broad range of political formations in various countries, commonly associated with the radicalism of the late 1960s. But to the extent that all these formations had something fundamental in common, what made the New Left 'new' was above all its dissociation from the traditional forms of 'old' left politics, both Stalinist Communism and social democracy. More particularly, the various New Lefts shared a commitment to emancipatory struggles apart from – or at least in addition to – traditional class struggle, especially the student, anti-Vietnam War and black liberation movements.

In Britain the development of the New Left was marked by institutional milestones in the form of influential journals whose changes of content and style record the trajectory of this movement through its various permutations. This literary record therefore provides a particularly useful framework for tracking the relevant history. It is true that the British New Left was in some important respects distinctive, especially because here the radicalism of the sixties, while converging with the international wave that culminated in the 'revolution' of 1968, was directly connected to, and continuous from, an earlier and rather different 'New Left', composed largely of dissident Communists with strong and abiding roots in the labour movement. But if this means that the British experience cannot be generalized without great caution, it also means that the history of the New Left in Britain provides a particularly well documented record of the transition from 'Old' Left to 'New' and, in the public debates between one generation and the next, eloquent testimony to the changes in the Western Left since 1956.

In 1959, *The New Reasoner*, founded by Communist dissidents John Saville and E. P. Thompson in 1956–7, joined by Ralph Miliband who had never been a member of the Party, merged with *Universities and Left Review*, created in 1957 by a group of very young **Oxbridge** radicals, notably Stuart Hall, Charles Taylor, and Raphael Samuel. The fruit of this union was the *New Left Review*. The two rather disparate founding projects were brought together not only by what they had in common but by what essentially divided them. Both were committed to the kind of cultural struggle which was felt to be especially urgent in the conditions of 'consumer capitalism'. Yet they came to this common project not only from different generations but from substantially different directions, in the

hope, no doubt, of converting their differences into complementarities.

Raymond Williams, who was brought into the planning of the new journal very early, makes an interesting witness because he never neatly fitted into either group and for that reason could be seen as bridging them. Looking back on his experience some years later, he spoke of various differences between the ~~two~~² the ULR people were less interested in the history and traditions of the international left than in the rapidly changing society of Britain, and more interested in a changing cultural experience than in political activism. The *New Reasoner* group was less attuned to immediate cultural changes in Britain and more steeped in the traditions of both international Marxism and of the labour movement, including the native British radical tradition. Williams situated himself somewhere in between. While he regarded the *New Reasoner* as a 'much more solid journal', and while in his own 'experience and style' (not to mention age) he located himself within the older generation, he found himself drawn to the interests of the younger generation, their preoccupation with a changing cultural experience. In retrospect, however, he judged himself wrong in having thought that a cultural and educational programme was enough, to the exclusion of engagement with 'tougher political problems'. More significantly, he concluded that the New ~~Left~~ and especially the younger generation, in its preoccupation with all that had changed in Britain with the advent of consumer capitalism, seriously underestimated all that had remained the same, miscalculating the power of the capitalist state and overestimating the possibilities of cultural politics. If the older generation was not entirely immune to this weakness, its engagement in traditional Marxist arguments may have offered some protection. Elsewhere (I shall come back to this), Williams also demonstrated another major difference between himself and the younger generation, refusing its tendency – also resisted by Thompson and others – to treat the working class as passive victims, irredeemably 'hegemonized' by TV and mass **consumption**.³ At any rate, his judgment from the start seems to have been that the merger never really took hold."

The product of this uneasy merger, the *New Left Review* under the editorship of Stuart Hall, was itself soon to fracture, at first more or less along the fault lines between the two founding projects. The result was the departure of Hall and Taylor; but the crisis did not in the end consolidate the ascendancy of the other, senior partner. On the contrary, control of the *Review* passed to another younger generation; and a wholly new team – Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn, Robin Blackburn *et al.* – soon displaced both of the founding projects and their **leading** figures.

This editorial succession, specifically the passage of editorial control from the *New Reasoner* generation to Perry Anderson *et al.*, is generally identified as the transition from the first to the second New Left; and it is

this transition that will form the background to my discussion here. I am **conscious** that to focus on this editorial history is to neglect a wide range of 'New Left' activism which flourished in Britain at the same time: CND, anti-racist and women's movements, and so on. The new NLR could hardly be regarded as a journal of these or any other movements and was, in fact, remarkably detached from any such political organizations. My object, however, is not to offer a comprehensive history of the New Left but to trace some important intellectual developments of which the history of NLR is symptomatic. It also needs to be said that the filiations and divergences between the various strands of the New Left are not unambiguous. The new **NLR** team, for example, was certainly young; yet despite the well-known breach between Anderson and E. P. Thompson (which spawned an influential debate about the history of **Britain**), **Stuart Hall** might have been excused for thinking that Anderson and co. had more in common with Thompson and **Saville** than with himself, more in common with *The New Reasoner* than with **ULR**. Certainly they proved, among other things, to be more interested in the Marxist tradition than in popular culture or consumption patterns. Nonetheless, it will be argued in what follows that the rupture signalled by the accession of the new editorial team was real and deep, symptomatic not simply of a generational transition from one phase of a single movement to another but of a larger epochal shift in the history of the post-war Western Left, which may be disguised by the common 'New Left' rubric. What is at issue here is not simply the history of one particular formation but the development of the Western Left at least from 1956 until today.

II

Let me begin by looking at some recent interpretations of the New Left in Britain. In a review of Lin Chun's book on the British New Left, Gregory Elliott describes the mission of the first New Left thus: 'a transformation of the British labour movement' which involved 'an adequate analysis of contemporary welfare capitalism (the "affluent society"); a critique of the culture of post-war Britain (the "consumer society"); and an exploration of the nature of a future post-capitalist order (socialism as a "whole way of life")'.¹³ The second new left – in particular, the second generation of the *New Left Review*: Anderson, Nairn, Blackburn et al. – did not, suggests Elliott, represent as complete a rupture with the old guard as the new generation liked to believe, but it did set itself apart in at least one major respect, eschewing 'what it regarded as the defining characteristic – and abiding vice – of its precursor: populism'. '[W]hereas the first New Left had regretted, and sought to bridge, the mutually injurious gulf between culture and politics, 'theory', and 'practice', intellectual and manual

workers, their successors made, as it were, a virtue of **necessity**.⁶ Turning from 'popular' culture to 'high culture' (and, Elliott might have added, from the study of 'popular struggles' to a preoccupation with 'high politics'), this second New Left began its intellectual convergence with Continental Marxism as well as with the cultural-political configuration culminating in the events of 1968.

This **climactic** year, argues Elliott, turned out to be not so much a revolutionary rupture for the Left as the 'year of the New Right'. Eventually, the New Left found itself increasingly 'on the defensive, bereft of any viable domestic – or international – alternative to a Labourism in disorderly retreat before the Thatcherite offensive'? The New Left may have represented, as Lin Chun suggests, a transition from the old left to new oppositional forces and theories, new forms of struggle of and for women, anti-racism, ecology and peace; but the 'new social movements' briefly occupied the Left's centre stage only to be superseded by 'some "old" (or at any **rate**, regressive) ones', 'the assembled ranks with an appetite for the shlock of the new, busy enjoining the British labour movement to lie down and die before the glossy French magazines'?

In general, this seems to me an acute and illuminating account. But some questions need to be raised about the suggestion (if I have understood it correctly) that both generations of the New Left were responding to the effects of 'welfare' and 'consumer' capitalism on the working class, although the second generation, in its flight from 'populism', accepted these realities by making a virtue of necessity. This suggestion seems to accord with those accounts of the post-war Western left, in Britain and elsewhere, which treat the various shifts of left intellectuals as responses to the cycles of working class militancy. The second New Left, it appears, adapted itself more completely to the realities of working class decline.

The history of the Western Left would then go something like this: within the long-term trend toward cultural and ideological struggle in response to the decline or failure of revolutionary class politics, there was a sharp hiatus in 1956, with an opening for a new kind of Western left, followed by two distinct but connected phases corresponding to the trajectory of the labour movement – the **resurgence of the late** sixties and early seventies, followed by a more decisive turn away from old left positions some time in the late 1970s with the retreat of the labour movement, and a final break with old verities about the conditions and agencies of struggle, and especially away from class politics of any kind.

Connecting the 'retreat of the intellectuals' to a declining labour movement is, again, a common **thème** in histories of the post-war Western Left, though there are, of course, variations on this basic theme. For example, on the further left, there is less indulgence toward the New Left's odyssey. The 'upturn-downturn' thesis of the Socialist Workers Party in

Britain (the largest of the neo-Trotskyist groups) suggests that the move away from class politics by many left intellectuals corresponds to the 'downturn' of working class militancy in the late seventies, after an upturn in the previous decade; but the SWP is inclined to judge this shift less as a necessity turned into a virtue than as an excessive and regrettable failure of nerve in a difficult period of 'downturn'. The first premise of the argument nevertheless remains the same: people who in principle embraced class politics and other old-left commitments responded to the realities of consumer capitalism **and/or** the disappointing failures of the working class by shifting to other – especially ideological and cultural – terrains of struggle.

There is, of course, much to be said in favour of accounts like this. In relation to the long-term trends, there can be little doubt that the history of the labour movement since World War II, or perhaps even since the 1920s, has encouraged a search for alternative revolutionary agencies and forms of struggle. And with respect to the phases in the development of the Western Left since 1956, there has, since the resurgence of the sixties and early seventies, certainly been a notable convergence of decline in labour militancy with the 'retreat of the intellectuals'. But there are some aspects of such explanations that seem to me problematic, especially as they relate to the history of the New Left and its successors. First, these explanations may be misreading the connection between working class politics and intellectual trends on the left; and second, far from exaggerating the rupture within the New Left, they may underestimate the break between the two generations, as well as the continuities between the second New Left and developments since the mid-seventies. Seen from a different perspective, the history of left intellectuals does not correspond so neatly to the rises and declines of working class politics; and the second New Left may have less – or at least no more – in common with the first than with the post-Maoisms and post-modernisms which emerged from the 'retreat'.

To bring this alternative history into perspective, we may begin with the judgment rendered by Ralph **Miliband** on the merger that founded the *New Left Review*. **Miliband** was almost alone in objecting to the merger. The two journals, he maintained, represented two very different currents of thought and experience. The editors of the *New Reasoner* were intellectuals of the labour movement, while the others were intellectuals for that movement. This judgment, which lay behind the departure of **Miliband** and Saville to found the *Socialist Register*, was to prove prophetic and seems to me to capture the essence of a historic rupture in the history of the post-war Western Left.

As it turned out, **Miliband** might have painted the contrast even more starkly than he did, because it would soon become clear that the detachment of the second New Left from the labour movement was even

greater than he had suggested; and this applies not just to the intellectuals of Universities and *Left Review* but also the second generation of NLR, among others. The second New Left did, to be sure, proclaim its commitment to the labour movement; and it showed a greater interest in economic questions than had either partner in the original merger. But a shift away from working class struggle was underway from the beginning, though it was to go through various stages. As early as 1964, Peter Sedgwick identified the first phase of that shift: 'NLR', he wrote, 'is now committed, at least on paper, to an activist and Marxist philosophy, in which struggle is acknowledged as the engine of social change, and economic levers are seen as operating at a more fundamental level of potency than cultural influences. Only the forms of struggle which are picked out for attention and commendation are not those of an industrial working-class movement; they are predominantly either agrarian or technocratic, depending on whether an underdeveloped or an advanced society is under scrutiny.'⁶ Marked by its 'gallicized syntax'⁷ and its Olympian tone, Sedgwick suggested, NLR under the new regime had severed any even notional 'umbilical link between itself and extra-intellectual sources of action in British society'.⁸ The freedom from those traditional ties expressed itself first in its preoccupation with the 'Third World'. In the years after Sedgwick wrote, this detachment would increasingly take the form of a self-proclaimed mission to import into Britain the most up-to-date (and scholastic) varieties of Continental Marxist theory. The new NLR project thus represented not only a detachment from any British political movement but also from the native tradition of radical thought and even from the important body of cultural criticism which was flourishing in post-war Britain.

The displacement from 'extra-intellectual sources of action in British society' was not simply geographic. It also signalled an increasing theoretical distance between NLR and any 'popular' movements. If, as Sedgwick suggested, NLR Mark II, even in its earliest days and at the height of its preoccupation with 'Third World' struggles, directed its attention 'not down to the grass-roots, but upwards',⁹ there was no inconsistency between that project and the turn to high politics and culture with which it came to be associated as it became the major vehicle for the transmission of continental Marxism to a benighted and 'empiricist' British culture. What Greg Elliott has described as the second New Left's repudiation of the first generation's 'abiding voice', its populism, can be read as a loss of interest in popular struggles in general, and the labour movement in particular. It can also be read as reflecting a growing conviction that the central terrain of socialist struggle was from now on intellectual.

Notwithstanding the friendly relations among at least some members of the first and second New Left, the break between these two generations

should not be underestimated; and I shall return to a consideration of its implications. I shall argue that this intellectual and political rupture was not just the product of a generational shift but was rooted in one of the greatest epochal transformations in modern history. But I want to turn first to the corollary of this discontinuity: the continuities between the second New Left and what came after. To state the point starkly: the major strand of continuity between current fashions and the second New Left (in sharp contrast to the first) is rooted not only in a common emancipatory project but in some of the less democratic impulses of the 1960s left. The corollary of this historical connection is that current fashions have more to do with the agenda of the 1960s than with the realities of the eighties and nineties.

III

There is one continuous theoretical strand which can be traced more or less without a break from the sixties up to now. Among the diverse movements we tend to lump together as the 'revolution' of the sixties, there emerged one major and long-lasting theme: an emphasis on the autonomy of ideological struggle and the leading role of intellectuals, in default of the working class. This tendency was not, at least in principle, inconsistent with support for popular struggles, especially in the 'Third World'. Dissatisfaction with the working class in advanced capitalist societies was, for example, sometimes expressed in a transfer of revolutionary faith to 'the South', the 'Third World', or peasant revolutions, and a keen interest in thinkers like **Fanon**; but even here, there existed a variety of 'Third Worldism' (to be distinguished from other varieties, belonging to an older left tradition, as in the journal, *Monthly Review*) marked by a strong tendency to promote students and intellectuals to the vanguard of history, as the leading agents of human emancipation – perhaps through the medium of 'cultural revolution'. A doctrine like Maoism, which for some represented an extension of traditional Marxist theories of class struggle, for others became a warrant for putting student radicals in place of revolutionary classes.

But with or without this kind of 'Third Worldism', there emerged a current of thought in which the labour movement was replaced by 'ideological class struggle'. Rebellious students and their intellectual mentors, armed with theories ranging from Mao and **Fanon** to Sartre and **Althusser**, were thought to represent the transmutation of theory into a 'material force', whose apotheosis came in 1968. This intellectual **self-glorification** binds some strands of yesterday's student radicalism with today's intellectual fashions which focus on discourse as the constitutive practice of social life and tend to regard the academy as the central arena of emancipatory politics. From that point of view, there is a direct **evolu-**

tionary line from Maoism to post-modernism, and from 'cultural revolution' to textual deconstruction.

This evolutionary path poses problems for any attempt to draw neat connections between intellectual retreat and the decline of working class militancy. Some of the problems are plainly chronological. We can acknowledge the long-range secular trends in Western socialist thought – the turn away from 'economistic' preoccupations which in the broadest terms unites the early forms of 'Western Marxism' with the current fashions in discourse theory – and their association with a long-term decline in revolutionary working class politics. But there are some important discrepancies in the attempt to establish more fine-grained connections, between the retreat of the labour movement in the late seventies and eighties and the definitive shift away from traditional socialist preoccupations toward the politics of discourse and 'identity' signalled by the emergence of 'post-Marxism'. The suggested correspondences between working class accommodations to capitalism and intellectual adjustments to the deficiencies of the labour movement are difficult to square with the **chronology** of post-Marxist theory.

The theoretical trends associated with the student movement of the sixties no doubt began with attempts to find revolutionary substitutes for a quiescent, or at least 'economistic', working class. But the very specific intellectual developments that gave rise to post-Marxism and its successors were taking place at a time – after 1968 – when advanced capitalist countries had just experienced a surge of working class militancy. In the years after 1968, 'a new wave of working-class struggle and socialist politics surged forward in the heartlands of the capitalist world,' writes Lin Chun. 'Large-scale workers' strikes in Italy (and the continued electoral advance of the Italian Communist Party), industrial militancy in Britain, and the high point of the labour movement in Japan were a few striking examples. The Portuguese revolution (1974–5) reopened the question of the possibility of a socialist revolution in post-war western Europe'. In Britain, whichever party was in power, 'factory occupations and other forms of workers' struggles reached a scale that had not been seen in this country since the 1920s', including the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974,¹² and so on. This was, as Lin Chun points out, also a moment when Marxist theory enjoyed a revival, and socialist intellectuals were not as isolated in the academy as they had been in previous decades.

Any decline of working class opposition in the decade following the recession of 1975–6 in Britain cannot, then, explain, for instance, the apparently sudden U-turn executed in the mid-seventies by some of the most extreme structuralist Marxists – not only heirs to the **Althusserian** legacy which had been conveyed to Britain by the *New Left Review* Mark II, but also adherents of **Maoism**.¹³ No such decline can explain their turn,

almost overnight, from the most uncompromising insistence on the centrality of class struggle to a denial altogether of its 'effectivity' (and, indeed, of any 'privileged' connection between the 'economic' and the 'political'), from the most doctrinaire structuralist theoreticism to the most dogmatic (if still abstractly theoretical) empiricism and the reduction of all history and social process to contingency. The most efficient explanation of such apparently sudden and extreme reversals – and at such an odd moment – is that they were not as sudden and extreme as they appear. It may be that the logic of the second phase was already very much present in the first, and that what looks like a U-turn is more like a flip of the coin.

Other less dramatic but, in retrospect, even more significant theoretical moves were being made in the 1970s. Theories emerged which, if not yet ostensibly repudiating Marxism, the traditional preoccupation with political economy and history, or the politics of class – indeed still affirming its centrality – were converting class struggle **into** a purely ideological battle conducted largely by intellectual proxy. It was not long before the same theorists gave birth to post-Marxism, and this development too makes more sense as an elaboration of themes already present in the brand of **Marxism** to which its adherents had earlier **subscribed**.¹⁴ At any rate, it would be difficult, quite so soon after the surge of 1968–1975, to regard these intellectual developments as responses to the decline of working class militancy, unless the Owl of Minerva had taken flight with uncanny prescience and alacrity.

Something no doubt happened in the seventies. But a slightly longer historical perspective brings into focus the continuities that cut across the apparent rupture in the middle of that decade. No appeal to the 'retreat' or 'downturn' after the surge can explain a development already well established in the 'upturn' **phase**.¹⁵ An answer can, however, be found in the student movement of the previous decade. There had, of course, existed not just one student movement but a whole range of political and cultural groups and projects, from revolutionary socialism to fundamentally apolitical 'counter-cultures'; but at the very peak of the 'upturn', in the midst of all the revolutionary **ferveur**, all the activism, all the **democratic** aspirations, all the acts of courage, indeed even in the midst of a renewed optimism about the resurgence of working class militancy, one theoretical principle was establishing itself which would prove especially tenacious: the autonomy of political and ideological struggles.

The early student movement, especially in the US, turned to thinkers like Herbert **Marcuse**, whose philosophy was certainly predicated on the absorption of the masses by the **hegemony** of consumer capitalism. But even more telling is the fact that the autonomy of politics and ideology was a leitmotif even – or especially – in some of the ostensibly most revolutionary manifestations of late-sixties radicalism, those most likely to

proclaim the importance of class struggle. This was most notably true of Maoism, with its extreme voluntarism and its conviction that revolutions can be made by sheer political and ideological will unfettered by material constraints. This tendency, both in its militant activism and in its sometimes wild irrationalism, differed sharply from the philosophical turn to culture by 'Western Marxists' earlier in the century. But for all the rhetoric of class struggle, the theoretical developments of the sixties provided a warrant for a view of socialist transformations as 'cultural revolutions' – whether Maoist or not – in which intellectuals and students are the principal agents, at best acting in alliance with, or even on behalf of workers **and/or** peasants, and increasingly as autonomous revolutionary agents in their own right.

Louis Althusser played a central role in the theoretical evolution of this trend, although his own relation to it was ambiguous. He seems never to have accepted an alternative to the working class as revolutionary agent, and his view of the '68 'revolution' was ambivalent at best; but he did contribute greatly to the theoretical process of establishing the 'autonomy' of ideology and politics. His wish to counter the economic reductionism of Stalinist Marxism is not enough to explain what he was about. At least part of the explanation must lie in his own flirtation with Maoism as an alternative to Stalinism. At any rate, whatever his own political views may have been, it was the theoretical 'autonomy' of 'instances' that remained as his principal legacy to student radicals.

The second New Left in Britain certainly identified itself with the revolutionary socialist end of the student radical spectrum, aligned, if anything, with the neo-Trotskyist revival which occurred in the late 1960s. But it is at least worth noting that, of the two main neo-Trotskyist groups, the International Socialists (IS, later the SWP) and the International Marxist Group (IMG), it was the latter that attracted some of **NLR's** leading figures, notably Robin Blackburn (future editor of **NLR**), with its greater emphasis on Third World struggles, anti-imperialism, student radicalism and cultural politics, as against the more 'orthodox' commitment to working class struggle which characterized IS. Nor, incidentally, were Blackburn and others immune to that brand of Maoism which promoted the centrality of student revolutionaries, and with it the autonomy of ideological and political struggle. Lin Chun, writing of Blackburn's advocacy, together with Alexander Cockburn, of 'Red Bases' on campuses, quotes him as saying, 'those who reject the strategy of the Red Base . . . will be in serious danger of becoming the objective allies of social imperialism and social fascism'. Her comment on this is that, 'Neither Blackburn nor **Cockburn** rejected the classical notion of the proletariat as the major leading agency of change, but the implication of their "Red Base" theory seems to contain something of the opposite.'¹⁸

Seen in this perspective, May '68 is indeed the emblematic moment of the new-model Left, but in its aspect as a 'cultural revolution' more than as an alliance of student radicalism with working class militancy. The dramatic events of the late sixties were certainly marked by a momentary convergence, at least in some countries, between working class militancy and a radical impulse of a different kind, though elsewhere such a convergence hardly took place, as in Germany, while in the US the gulf between students and workers could hardly have been more striking than in the Vietnam war. At any rate, even where there was a remarkable moment of unity, a divergence was not long in coming. That this divergence was in process before any decisive downward trend in working class militancy suggests that it may not have been simply a retreat by socialists, and their evolution into post-Marxists, in response to the deficiencies of the labour movement. It suggests instead that, among the various emancipatory impulses that made up the student movement, there existed a political tendency whose belief in class politics was always subordinate to faith in the revolutionary efficacy of intellectuals, radical students, and cultural revolution. If anything, the surge of militancy after 1968 seems to have accelerated rather than retarded the divergence, while the elevation of intellectual practice in the theories of the western Left had a momentum of its own.

A comparison of 1968 and 1972 is suggestive – and here the differences are as much national as temporal. If Paris '68 represents a movement in which students and intellectuals play a prominent role in alliance with workers, the British miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 are hardly representative of working class retreat, but they do epitomize another kind of divergence from student radicalism or cultural struggle. These were outbreaks of class militancy belonging entirely to organized labour and in no way congenial to the aspirations of intellectuals as the vanguard of revolution, cultural or otherwise. It is hard to know what to make of the fact that post-Marxism was gestating in Britain just when militancy of this kind had experienced a resurgence; but the chronology becomes somewhat less mysterious if the convergence of the British New Left with the forces of May '68 is understood less as endorsing class struggle, even with an intellectual vanguard, than as asserting the autonomy of politics and ideology, promoting not the revolutionary agency of workers but that of intellectuals and students. The varieties of Marxism which flourished at the same time were those most congenial to this view of revolutionary agency.

If there is an epochal rupture in the evolution of the Western left since 1956, it occurs at the point when a **section** of the left intelligentsia stopped thinking of itself as an ally in popular struggles, or even as a vanguard, or even as a critic from the philosophical sidelines, the point at which people stopped thinking of themselves, to use Miliband's formula, as intellectuals

of an emancipatory movement, and started to think of themselves as intellectuals *for* that movement, or, to put it more strongly, when they started thinking of themselves as the movement itself. This rupture more or less coincides with the generational shift from the first to the second New Left. What we are seeing today is that development taken to its ultimate conclusion, and the end-result is a fairly extreme kind of intellectual **substitutionism**.

IV

Explanations for these developments are no doubt to be found not so much in the history of the labour movement as in the sociology of the academy. Both, of course, are ultimately rooted in the evolution of post-war capitalism; but the connections between the two processes – between the decline of class politics and the autonomization of intellectual activity – are rather more mediated than the 'upturn-downturn' or 'surge-retreat' explanations imply. This is not the place to venture any systematic explanation, but one or two points are worth noting. The most obvious point is that the post-war period of economic growth, and the sixties in particular, saw a massive expansion of post-secondary education in the capitalist world, though to varying degrees and with varying effects in different countries. There is an almost perfect correspondence between the explosion of numbers and the emergence of student radicalism, as the conservatism of the fifties was followed by the militancy of the sixties.

Historians of the student movement generally seem to agree that the sheer growth in numbers was unquestionably significant; but it is not so easy to determine where exactly that significance lay – whether, for example, rapid expansion led to a deterioration of conditions in the university, so that students found themselves in over-crowded and under-resourced institutions; whether the growth of a hitherto miniscule privileged group evoked an experience of relative status-deprivation as it became a less distinctive mass, an experience compounded by a disproportion between the rising numbers and the resources to accommodate them; whether, on the contrary, the relevant factor was a revolution of rising expectations; or whether the emergence of a mass student body simply dissolved traditional solidarities between students and ruling elites, reinforcing a general reaction against authority common to students and workers.

The suggestion has, for example, been made that the student movements of 1966–68 were a result of the complex problems caused by a 'proletarianization' of the intelligentsia in the West, as their numbers dramatically increased, their social status declined while their moral authority generally remained intact." 'We are no longer assured of becoming future rulers . . .',

wrote the students of the Sorbonne in 1968. 'We are from now on workers like **others**.'¹⁸

It is no doubt true that in some places – notably the urban universities of France and Italy – expansion produced overcrowded institutions, inadequate resources and a lack of contact with professors. Perhaps even in the US, where university campuses (not least, the centre of student radicalism, the University of California at Berkeley) were typically well-endowed oases sheltered from the disorders and discomforts of urban life in advanced capitalism, there were some legitimate complaints about the inaccessibility of senior professors and the inordinate responsibilities devolving on their teaching assistants. Yet the students' claim to proletarian status was always a bit of romantic self-dramatization on the part of an albeit enlarged privileged minority.

Still, some national distinctions can be drawn. For example, the argument that student unrest in the sixties had something to do with the declining status of the intelligentsia may have a certain plausibility in France – the site of the archetypal student 'revolution' – where intellectual life had long been closely tied to rule, where state-office had long been regarded as the highest career in a tradition reaching back to the absolutist state, and where education in elite academies **prepared** the country's governors, creating (as indeed it still does) virtual dynasties of high office-holders. Against that background, the massive expansion of higher education – without commensurate resources to accommodate the growing numbers or high places to absorb more aspirants to office, not to mention long-term shifts in the centre of gravity from the state to capitalist enterprise – might have been experienced as a loss of status; and this might not only have evoked a demand for material improvements but may also have displaced to other spheres the claims and aspirations of intellectuals.

Elsewhere, conditions were not quite the same. In Britain, the role of **intellectuals** was traditionally different than in France. In any case, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the growth of post-secondary education in the **1960s**, which still left Britain with a shamefully low proportion of its population in higher education. (In fact, one of the paradoxical features of the Thatcher era was a real explosion in the post-secondary student population, which, in the economic aftermath of **Thatcherism** and in conditions of structural mass unemployment, really does begin to look like the disadvantaged proletariat that some sixties radicals claimed to be.) Still, there was substantial growth especially outside the established elite institutions; and while this surely represented an expansion more than a contraction of opportunity, it nevertheless created the conditions for a 'mass, oppositional **intelligentsia** in Britain – one unintegrated into the traditional "intellectual aristocracy" ... and disinclined to relate to its society "as if" (in [Perry] Anderson's words) "it were an immutable second

nature”¹⁹. With the growth of polytechnics, there also emerged a new layer of students and lecturers, often with class origins and career paths different from those of traditional academics in the universities (sometimes, for example, becoming researchers for trade unions). But if these institutions did perhaps fit more exactly the model of the under-resourced proletarianized academy, their students were less rather than more likely to be attracted to the student politics of 'cultural revolution'; and they may have looked to some observers on the left as if they might develop into Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals' of the working class.

In the US, where the proportion of the population in higher education has long been exceptionally large, university students were (and, up to a point, remain) an advantaged group, whose 'life-chances' in the 1960s were certainly privileged. In fact, career prospects for students could hardly have been better than they were in the sixties. Nonetheless, the Vietnam war produced exceptional tensions, at a time when the expansion of higher education had created a mass of students far larger than the British, and even less integrated into any kind of 'aristocracy'. There were, of course, other distinctive circumstances too, particularly the racial conditions that had produced the civil rights movement. And all of this occurred in the wake of a particularly virulent strain of Cold War politics, with its own particular resonances in the university, which gave rise to the Free Speech Movement, often credited with setting off the international wave of student radicalism.

The American case, for all its specificities, reveals the complexities and paradoxes of the student movement with particular clarity. If the first wave of student activism began here, with the Free Speech Movement in 1960, it may conceal as much as it reveals to treat this movement **as** the opening salvo in a decade of student radicalism. **As** a response to the Cold War witch hunt perpetrated in particular by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Free Speech Movement represented the end of the old left as much as the launch of the **new**.²⁰ It was in a sense a bridge between old and new forms of radicalism, temporarily uniting Spanish Civil War veterans and trade union activists with academic liberals and student radicals; but it also marked a breach. After this, there was a major change of terrain and agencies, as student radicalism began to turn inward.

The Free Speech Movement was still connected to old forms of radicalism outside the university, to both the veterans of anti-Fascist struggles and the labour movement. In the wake of the FSM, the campus became for many the main arena of struggle, with students as principal agents and their grievances **as** primary motivations. Some of the most notable leaders were, to be sure, civil rights activists, involved, at some risk to themselves, in voter registration drives and marches in the Deep South, especially in 1964; and the impulses which drove the kind of extra-campus

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activism displayed during the Vietnam war were never completely exhausted, still faintly in evidence perhaps more recently, for example, in opposition to US imperialism in Nicaragua and El Salvador. But the student movement in its other, inward-turning aspect followed its own historical trajectory; and it has left a different and more lasting legacy.

The difficulty of disentangling the various strands of student radicalism is, of course, compounded by the convergence of traditional left politics with new forms of 'counter-culture'. There is no need here, however, to explore the connections or the contradictions between these often very different motivations or the diverse movements that together constituted student radicalism. We need only acknowledge the existence of certain impulses in some elements of student radicalism which have less to do with opposition to capitalism than with submersion in it. It is not simply that – as critics have often liked to say – music and drugs were just another outlet for consumer capitalism. The point is rather that to talk about the growth of student numbers as a proletarianization of intellectuals tends to obscure the degree to which that growth testified to the expansion of capitalist prosperity. This explanation masks the extent to which the culture of the sixties **Left** was determined not by the experience of capitalist decline and depression which had shaped the old left but, on the contrary, by an ascendant capitalism. It also disguises the degree to which a university education was becoming for the first time, and particularly in the US, an inevitable and universal rite of passage for all members of the 'middle class' – an initiation that for some involved the breaking of taboos before assuming once and for all the obligations of the dominant culture.

The relevant process here may not be proletarianization but **bourgeoisification** – perhaps a loss of status as students ceased to form an aristocracy, but nonetheless a gateway to privilege. The university itself now also offered a particularly attractive bourgeois career. The expansion of the university meant, after all, not just a growth in student numbers but new job opportunities for its graduates, an explosion of university teachers which was to last just long enough for veterans of the sixties to become the lecturers of later decades. Those theoretical currents that in the sixties had celebrated ideological struggle, cultural revolution and the world-historic agency of intellectuals and students were bound to hold special attractions for many in this social layer. The expansion of this academic bourgeoisie may also have tended to magnify out of all proportion the importance of intellectual fashions which, while looming very large in the eyes of academics, left the rest of the world untouched (a tendency more pronounced today than ever). At any rate, whether or not these currents represented the best, or even the most important, tendency in sixties radicalism, they were always likely to be the most intellectually – or academically – long-lasting. They were certainly the most flattering to

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intellectual pretensions, the most conducive to academic productivity and the least susceptible to the vagaries of history and material constraints.

This tendency is, of course, not all that remains of sixties radicalism, and one point in particular needs to be added to any assessment of its legacy. In the vast expansion of post-secondary education, there were qualitative as well as quantitative changes in the demographic profile of the student body. Although changes in its class composition were, and still are, notoriously slow, there was one significant demographic revolution, with the most far-reaching effects: the growth in the number of women. In the US, for example, the number of women receiving college degrees doubled between 1960 and 1968, and by the late 1960s almost half of all women high-school graduates went on to higher education.²¹ This, needless to say, gave a huge boost to the women's movement, producing a new generation of activists as well as a whole range of new intellectual practices. But if the women's movement has remained as the sixties' most consistently activist legacy, it is especially ironic that it has also produced some of the most inaccessible and exclusionary discourses in today's academy.

V

The history of Western intellectuals clearly has a logic of its own, determined by their own situation, their own material conditions, their own relations to the state and capital, and not just by upturns and downturns in working class activity. There is, presumably, nothing particularly controversial about this observation; but it also means that any periodization of the Western Left must take all this into account. A different periodization implies different axes of division between one phase and another and among the varied tendencies within each phase. The convergence of so many strands in the emancipatory projects of the Left – the labour movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement – complicates the picture, but some broad trends are clear enough.

One point again stands out: whatever the immediate causes of the student revolt and whatever deprivations may have played a part in it, the movement occurred not in the context of economic decline or stagnation but in a moment – and as a result – of capitalist prosperity. The intricate mechanisms by which material prosperity produced widespread rebellion may not be easy to trace, but a recognition of this simple fact brings into focus the sharp generational rupture between the first New Left and those that followed it.

Greg Elliott describes the second British New Left as founded on a similar social base as their predecessors: 'the enlarged stratum of intellectual and cultural producers generated by post-war capitalism – a

category swelled by the massive expansion of tertiary education in the 1960s'.²² Without making too much of the (not insignificant) difference between the enlargement of the 'stratum of intellectual and cultural producers' before the 1960s and the growth of the tertiary sector which occurred in that decade, I do think that (apart from various differences in age, personal experience, background and experience) some important distinctions need to be made between the first New Left's leading lights – people like E. P. Thompson, John Saville and Ralph Miliband – and the second generation: Perry Anderson, Robin Blackburn, *et al.*.

The difference between Ralph Miliband, Edward Thompson, or John Saville and the next generation of New Left luminaries was not just an age difference of, say, twelve to twenty years. That relatively small generational difference reflected a much larger historical shift, maybe one of the most significant epochal shifts in modern history. One clear dividing line between these generations is World War II (in which Miliband, Thompson and Saville all served), preceded by the Spanish Civil War which was the formative event for so many Western socialists. This means that the first generation, in one way or another, directly experienced the historic trauma of Fascism and the struggle against it, as well as the social interactions, the contact with people of all classes, the political experience and expectations generated by the Second World War.

There was no comparable formative experience in the political development of the second generation. Even the Vietnam war, opposition to which was a critical moment in the development of the second New Left, is as important for what it did not mean to them as for what it did. After all, besides its geographic distance, this was a war to which students and intellectuals related largely by their absence from it. At any rate, it may help to place the differences between the two generations into perspective if we consider that the only life-experience that shaped the second generation as World War II had shaped the first was their experience as university students.

In some ways even more important is the fact that the first and second generations stood on different sides of the great divide between the Depression and an ascendant capitalism. The difference between those two generations is the very large difference between those who grew up in the Depression and those who came to political consciousness in a time of rising prosperity. The historical memory of the first generation would continue to shape their conception of capitalism, its possibilities and limits, just as Fascism – together with the class divide between ruling class appeasement and socialist resistance – would remain for them the most vivid expression of capitalist decline. For the second generation, capitalist productivity and growth, conjoined with 'bourgeois democracy' in advanced capitalist countries, would serve as the normative guide.

It may seem odd to make this claim about the second generation, a group of young intellectuals whose theoretical and political agenda grew out of a preoccupation with capitalist decline, in a country that seemed to them exempt from any rising economic tide. Perry Anderson himself has written that the new editorial group found its bearings, its own editorial programme, at a time when 'the national crisis of **British** capitalism was unmistakable', and that **NLR's** project was to comprehend that national crisis.²³ The series of articles written by Anderson and Nairn in 1964–5, analyzing the various elements of Britain's crisis, the inadequacies of British capitalism and its attendant culture, set the agenda which established the new identity of NLR. Yet if the dominant theme in the new NLR programme was capitalist decline, it is just here, in the 'Nairn-Anderson' theses, that the assumptions of NLR II about capitalist progress are most clearly visible. The analysis of Britain's 'present crisis' makes it clear that the defining idea of this second New Left, the idea that determined its self-proclaimed identity, was a conception of capitalism in which that 'crisis' was exceptional, testimony not to the inherent contradictions of capitalism in general but to the specific imperfections of Britain as a capitalist economy and its deviations from the capitalist norm. This was combined with a view of capitalist democracy according to which Britain's failure to transform its political and cultural superstructures, and especially its failure to modernize its state by means of 'bourgeois revolution', was at the root of its economic debility.

Nothing could be further from the formative experience of the first generation. The ensemble of Depression, Fascism and Second World War surely shaped the consciousness of the first New Left as profoundly as, say, the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars had determined the intellectual life of another generation. It is hard to imagine an intellectual history of the late 18th and early 19th centuries that remains silent on the cultural and ideological effects of the latter events, but some histories of the New Left have accomplished something like a silence of that magnitude. Yet the epochal difference that divides the first and second generations of the New Left is if anything underlined by the failure of recent commentators to take note of it. That failure testifies to a historical amnesia so profound that it has afflicted historians and their subjects alike.

Contextual differences, then, had a great deal to do with the distinctive attitudes that set the first New Left apart from their successors. Not least among these attitudes, especially in Britain, was the first generation's continuing attachment – often organizational but always in principle – to the labour movement. Their conception of capitalism entailed a particular view of the agencies best suited to transform it; and, while the realities of modern capitalism and modern means of communication had, in their view, placed cultural struggle very high on the socialist agenda, the

objective was to transform not to replace the working class. People like Thompson (and, for that matter, Raymond Williams) remained vehemently opposed to conceptions of hegemony depicting a working class irredeemably mesmerized by consumer capitalism and the mass media, and requiring substitution **by free-thinking intellectuals**. The continuities between the cultural preoccupations of the first and second New **Left** should not disguise the rupture between their respective conceptions of socialist agency and the relationship between **intellectuals** and the working class.

It is also worth noting certain significant differences between British Marxist intellectuals and their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. If the British Communist Party never became a mass party like others in Europe, it was nevertheless grounded in a uniquely long-established and strong labour movement. By contrast, the mass parties of Italy, France or Spain had less well established traditions of organized labour. They did, however, gain a powerful impetus from the anti-Fascist struggle. Perhaps because so many Communist intellectuals in these countries had been drawn to Communism not so much by any attachment to the labour movement or even any prior ideological commitment to socialism but by the fight against Fascism – and perhaps because of other more long-standing differences in the position of intellectuals, notably in their relation to the state – their relationship to the working class was also arguably different, certainly as regards their conception of the task confronting left intellectuals in advancing the socialist cause. It is possible to **argue** that the intellectual's aspiration to primacy was embedded in the culture of the Continental Left much earlier, and more organically. To put the point briefly and baldly, it is hard to imagine anyone accusing, say, French left intellectuals at any time of '**populism**'.

This means that the autonomization of politics and ideology, together with a detachment from the labour movement, represented a sharper rupture for the British Left than for some others. It also means that the adoption of Continental Marxism by the second New Left, in its NLR incarnation, represented a significant political break, marking a more decisive shift away from the labour movement and class politics than is immediately apparent in its revival of Marxist theory. That shift was, it could be argued, right from the beginning encoded in NLR's **anti-'populism'**; and it is one of the major paradoxes of the second New Left that this transformation took the form of a renewed commitment to revolutionary Marxism.

The ambiguities in the project of the second New Left seem to have been apparent to its predecessors. Here, for example, is what E. P. Thompson had to say about the political implications of Western Marxism:

There is no mark more distinctive of Western Marxisms, nor more revealing as to their

profoundly anti-democratic premises. Whether Frankfurt School or **Althusser**, they are marked by their heavy emphasis upon the ineluctable weight of ideological modes of domination – domination which destroys every space for the initiative or creativity of the mass of the people – a domination from which only the enlightened minority or intellectuals can struggle free. . . . it is a sad premise from which socialist theory should start (all men and women, except for us, are originally stupid) and one which is bound to lead on to pessimistic or authoritarian **conclusions**.²⁴

Even Raymond Williams, in spite of his differences with the first New Left, had something not dissimilar to say about his own attitude to the choices confronting British Marxists in the 1950s and thereafter, as he looked back in 1977 at the development of the post-War Left in Britain. He rejected, he says, the rhetorical populism which complacently ignored the implications of 'consumer' capitalism and the 'powerful new pull' it exerted upon the people. At the same time, he continued:

because I saw the process as options under pressure, and knew where the pressure was coming from, I could not move to the other available position: that contempt of the people, of their hopelessly **corrupted** state, of their vulgarity and credulity by comparison with an educated minority, which was the staple of cultural criticism of a non-Marxist kind and which seems to have survived intact, through the appropriate alterations of vocabulary, into a formalist Marxism which makes the whole people, including the whole working class, mere carriers of the structures of a **corrupt** ideology. . . .²⁵

Against this trend, Williams insisted that 'there were still, and still powerful, existing resources':

To stay with the existing resources; to learn and perhaps to teach new resources; to live the contradictions and the options under pressure so that instead of denunciation or writing-off there was a chance of understanding them and tipping them the other way: if these things were populism, then it is as well that the British Left, including most Marxists, stayed with it."

There may be some ambiguity here about whether Williams would, in the 1960s, have included the new editorial board of the *New Left Review* among those Marxists who 'stayed with it'. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that, as Greg Elliott has emphasized, they themselves defined their own project as a significant departure from the old Marxist 'populism'. They certainly took upon themselves the task of importing those 'Western' or 'formalist' **Marxisms** which Thompson and Williams associated with the 'writing-off' of a thoroughly hegemonized working class and with the transfer of socialist agency to enlightened intellectuals. In this respect, the renewal of Marxist theory which the second New Left did so much to promote had as much in common with the project of their post-Marxist successors as with that of their first New Left predecessors.

VI

The *New Left Review* has never explicitly 'written off' the working class,

and it has continued to advance the Marxist tradition in various ways. Its editorial programme has, to be sure, continued to display a declining interest in 'popular' culture, 'popular' struggles and the labour movement in **particular**.²⁷ It has also remained to a great extent insulated from a substantial section of British left intellectuals – those polytechnic lecturers, other academics and trade union researchers whose interests have been more consistently articulated by an organization like the Conference of Socialist Economists and a journal like *Capital and Class*. At the same time, while its theoretical project, its conception of socialist agency and the role of intellectuals, has certainly had important affinities with 'post-Marxist', post-structuralist and post-modernist currents, the trajectory of leading NLR figures has remained distinctive. For example, the focus on high politics and culture which has marked NLR II from its earliest days, together with the **Andersonian** analysis of British capitalism and the antiquated British state, has found a new expression in a preoccupation with constitutional and electoral reform (many leading figures in Charter 88, the current movement for constitutional reform in Britain, cut their teeth on the Nairn-Anderson theses). Early critics like Peter Sedgwick, who remarked on the lack of concern evinced by the new NLR for the fate of political democracy in the regimes they singled out for praise, might be surprised at the current enthusiasm for 'democratic' constitutional reform; yet Sedgwick might have found the displacement of 'popular' struggles by constitutional change a predictable outcome of what he saw as a tendency on the part of the second New Left toward an elitist, Fabian-style **reformism**.²⁸ Be that as it may, the characteristic preoccupations of this second New Left may also have sheltered NLR from the more extravagant – and ultimately more anti-democratic and regressive – manifestations of today's intellectual culture. Certainly NLR's continuing interest in politics and economics (and an abiding attachment to the 'Enlightenment project') have precluded anything more, at best, than a profound ambivalence toward the latest irrationalist tendencies in post-structuralism and post-modernism (though NLR's book-publishing partner, Verso, seems more attuned to current fashions).

Others on the left in Britain and elsewhere have, of course, taken much further the logic ascribed by Thompson to 'Western Marxisms'. Not the least of the many ironies in the history of the Western Left is the extent to which European Communism became a breeding ground for the 'retreat from class'. The **CPGB's** fashionable (but now defunct) journal, *Marxism Today*, for example, became a major vehicle for the autonomization of ideology, 'culture' and intellectual practice in general. To situate these intellectual developments in their historical context, it is probably worth adding that this journal enjoyed its brief vogue – and suffered its demise – in the hands of British Communists who stood on the same side of the

historic and generational divide as the founders of NLR Mark II, though Martin Jacques and co. went immeasurably further than Anderson et al. in accepting the triumph of consumerism and even Margaret Thatcher's 'people's capitalism'.²⁹

The autonomization of cultural and intellectual practice has now been pushed to its outer limits by left academics. Productive activity has finally been displaced by 'discourse' as the constitutive practice of social life, the material reconstruction of society has been replaced by the intellectual deconstruction of texts, and the terrain of left politics has been purposefully enclosed within the walls of the academy, while historical causality has been completely dissolved in post-modern fragmentation, 'difference' and contingency.

This story has its own chronology. In this chronology, as we have seen, there is an epochal rupture not in the mid-seventies but earlier, at the point when a section of the left intelligentsia aspired to become the movement itself. The line from there to here – from, say, Maoism to post-modernism – cuts across the epochal phases of working class politics, a course of development chronologically coeval with the career-span of people who were students in the 1960s and who today are senior academics. The attempt to detach intellectual and cultural practice from material and historical constraints has run the full course from Maoist voluntarism to post-modern contingency, between two poles of that curious but not uncommon paradox, the irrationalism of intellectuals.

The implications of these intellectual developments have been disguised by the fact that their exponents have often claimed to speak for the truly democratic and emancipatory impulses of the 'new social movements' or the 'politics of identity'. The paradox here is not simply that 'theory' has been separated from 'practice', or that the Left has become more 'academic' than ever. It is rather that left academics have adopted modes of intellectual activity that seem deliberately exclusionary; and the waters are further muddied by the fact that the more inaccessible the fashionable discourses become, the less available they are to all but a small minority of initiates, the more they proclaim their celebration of 'popular culture'. If the old anti-populism grew out of a conviction that the working class had been effectively submerged in the culture of capitalism, that anti-populism has now come full circle. The very same conviction on which it was based has now produced a new and perverse kind of populism. The hegemony of consumer capitalism is now irrevocably conceded, sometimes embraced and even celebrated, at the same time **as** it is invoked to justify the identification of 'politics' with the academy's most exclusive and arcane discursive practices. Even in the women's movement, which once broke down so many barricades, there now exists a form of post-modern academic feminism which is shoring up one of the most stubborn

roadblocks standing in the way of its own emancipatory project, the class barrier which has often divided feminists from working class women.

The readiness with which some British left intellectuals in the eighties (most notably in *Marxism Today*) accepted the claims of Thatcher's 'people's capitalism' – its boasts about extending the benefits of consumerism, shareholding and home-ownership to the working class – illustrates how divorced the new inverted (or anti) populism could be from the realities of capitalism as it now is, and how thoroughly unprepared it would be for the prolonged and structural crisis that was just around the corner. Even at the height of Thatcherism this judgment seemed at best a little premature and overblown, and at worst patronizing, vastly exaggerating the extent and duration of the material benefits accruing to the great majority and underestimating the very strict limits of that 'revolution'. Today, as Thatcher's chickens have come home to roost with a vengeance, that judgment seems not only naive but in questionable taste.

But this is only one – and not the most extreme – example of the extent to which the Left today is ill-equipped to confront the problems of the here and now. If a growing consumerism was the defining characteristic of earlier decades, the capitalism of the nineties, while still, of course, consumerist, has its own distinctive form. It is more specifically defined by things like structural mass unemployment, growing poverty and homelessness, 'flexible' labour markets, and changing patterns of work in the form of **casualization** and low-paid part-time jobs, or overwork for the remaining few in 'downsized' enterprises, together with the global imposition of market imperatives increasingly immune to cushioning by the old forms of state intervention.

The new capitalism has its expression, too, in the altered prospects and aspirations of university students. Lin Chun and Greg Elliott both conclude their discussions of the British New Left with a reference to Jonathan Ree's comment in 1974 that 'the socialist intellectual youngsters occupy the buildings, while the socialist intellectual oldsters occupy the chairs.'"¹ For Lin Chun, this is a comment on the confinement of modern radicalism in the West to the academy, both then and now. For Greg Elliott, Ree's observation highlights the difference between then and now. 'Updated for *New Times*,' he nicely observes, 'Ree's verdict might read: the post-modernist intellectual oldsters occupy the chairs, while the environmentalist youngsters are preoccupied with making ends meet.'

And that about sums it up. Some of yesterday's militant youngsters are today's post-modernist chair-holding oldsters. If their high aspirations yesterday to change (if not to **rule**) the world have failed to materialize, their hopes of a comfortable career have at least been fulfilled. Their – I should say our – students today can barely hope for a decent job, never mind think about leading a cultural revolution. If there ever was a **prole-**

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tarianization of students, this is it, as overcrowded and underfunded universities house students many of whom (especially in North America) are already part-time wage-earners, and for whom a university education has become both more economically essential and increasingly irrelevant, a necessary but far from sufficient condition of life-time employment.

The current theoretical fashions are **very** far removed from these realities. They are not about the new world order since 1989, nor even about the long-term trends in capitalist development since the late 1970s. What passes for the very up-to-date looks less like a confrontation with the eighties and nineties than the agenda of the sixties running its course. At the very time that capitalism exerts its totalizing logic on the whole 'new world order', the most fashionable left intellectuals, cultivating their varied and fragmented patches of discourse and difference, claim the supremacy of their discursive practices while ruling out any form of 'totalizing' knowledge that might be adequate to comprehend the operations of the capitalist system. They even deny its systematic totality, its very existence as a system, while still, paradoxically, accepting, at least by default, the universality and eternity of 'the **market**'. **As** the expanding logic of that 'market' creates increasing strains along the fault lines of class, we are enjoined to pursue the fragmented 'politics of identity', with little hope of anything more than the most particularistic and local resistances within the **interstices** of capitalism.

To confront today's realities requires striking out in new directions. At the same time, while the new conditions of contemporary capitalism require new analyses, we should not make the mistake, as Raymond Williams tells us the younger New Left did, of underestimating everything that has not changed in the capitalist system. If, as now seems very likely, the rising tide of capitalist prosperity in the fifties and sixties proves to be an aberration, it also seems likely that in our present condition we shall get more guidance from those who remember the thirties and forties than from those whose ideas are deeply rooted in an ascendant capitalism, or from their post-modern successors who have yet to catch up with the present, let alone look to the future.

NOTES

- 1 Perhaps the earliest account of this distinction is Peter Sedgwick's 'The Two New Left's', originally published in *International Socialism* 17, August 1964, and reprinted in David Widgery ed., *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968* (Harmondsworth, 1976). References here will be to the latter edition. The most recent major study of the British New Left, which also speaks of two generations, is Lin Chun's *The British New Left* (Edinburgh, 1993).
- 2 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London, 1979). pp. 361-66.
- 3 See Sedgwick, pp. 137-8.
- 4 Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 363.
- 5 Gregory Elliott, 'Missing Ingredients', *Radical Philosophy* 68, Autumn 1994, p. 46.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Sedgwick, p. 148.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 147–8.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 12 Lin Chun, p. 109.
- 13 The most dramatic example is provided by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, whose transformation I have discussed in *The Retreat from Class* (London, 1986), pp. 79–84.
- 14 See, for example, Ernesto Laclau's 'Fascism and Ideology', in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London, 1977), a critique of Nicos Poulantzas's *Fascism and Dictatorship* (published in 1974), in which Laclau already goes some distance in establishing the autonomy of ideology. I have discussed his argument in *The Retreat from Class*, pp. 47–53.
- 15 I originally made some of these points in a response I was invited to make to a critical review of my book, *The Retreat from Class*, by Alex Callinicos in the SWP theoretical journal, a review in which the 'upturn-downturn' thesis figured prominently. My reply appeared in *International Socialism* 2:35.
- 16 Lin Chun, pp. 106 n. 106 and 96.
- 17 See, for example, Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State, 1917 to the Present* (London, 1988), p. 97.
- 18 Quoted in *ibid.* p. 97 (my own translation).
- 19 Elliott, p. 47.
- 20 Some of the connections, personal if not ideological, between the Old Left, particularly Spanish Civil War veterans, and the Left of the sixties, are traced in Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford, 1994). See also David Lance Goines, *The Free Speech Movement* (Berkeley, 1994).
- 21 Johanna Brenner, 'The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: US Feminism Today', *New Left Review* 200 (1993), p. 107 n. 13.
- 22 Elliott, p. 46.
- 23 Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980), pp. 137–8.
- 24 Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, pp. 377–8.
- 25 Raymond Williams, 'Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945', *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976–January 1977), p. 87.
- 26 Williams, 'Notes on Marxism', p. 87.
- 27 Although my own tenure on the editorial board of *New Left Review* fell within the period of 'downturn' or 'retreat', the journal's charter continued to proclaim that 'a revolution in social and political life will only be achieved by the conscious will and aspiration of the majority of the producers. The central contingentsof that majority continue to be the body of workers engaged in the fundamental processes of the generation of material wealth, in the advanced capitalist economies of today.' I once did a quick survey of articles for the period 1984–1988, in preparation for a 'perspectives' meeting to which I submitted an internal document, outlining some concerns about the *Review's* editorial direction. For all that the relevant period fell within the 'downturn' phase, it nonetheless embraced some fairly important moments in the history of the British labour movement, the miners' strike of 1984–5, Wapping, etc. I quote here from my document: 'Out of 184 articles, there has been *one* minor piece on the miners' strike, an anecdotal, experiential account of the strike as it affected one community. There has been nothing more on this event or about any other major industrial dispute in Britain or elsewhere, whether empirical, experiential, or analytical. Only one or two articles have appeared concerning anything remotely resembling the issues of immediate concern to workers: one on the labour process debate, and another on the Swedish wage-earner funds. Apart from that, there has been one article relating to the composition of the working class – i.e. on white-collar workers; one on the general prospects of European labour parties; and one historical article on the by-gone

days of labour in the great city. That is the sum of our coverage of workers' struggles, the issues which engage them, the condition of the working class under Thatcherism, the attack on trade union rights in Britain, the comparative state of working class struggles internationally, the changing composition of the working class, the assumptions about transformations in the nature of capitalism and the **working** class within it **on which post-Marxist** arguments are founded, and so on.' It seemed to me then. as it does now. that this editorial **deficit** had roots much further back.

28 Sedgwick, pp. 148–9.

29 For a devastating analysis of one year's issues of *Marxism Today* (1988), see John Saville, 'Marxism Today: An Anatomy', *Socialist Register* 1990, pp. 35–59.

30 Lin Chun, p. 195; Elliott, p. 48.