Book Review: Marxism Today

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Published version

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Bernard McKenna

Phil Graham

The briefly resurrected *Marxism Today* (1998), edited by Martin Jacques, sets out to deal with perceived failures of the 'Blair project' (Jacques, 1998: 2). Jacques opens the issue by reaffirming that Blair, which is to say *New Labour*, is the successful creation of the 'New Left' projects, the first of which began in the late-fifties and early sixties in both Britain and the US, and which were vigorously revived in the late 1980s. However, the most comprehensive debate is fairly much contained in the first three articles, written by Hobsbawn, Hall, and Mulgan, insofar as the broadest defining parameters of Third Way 'values' are addressed by these writers.

Since he is an exemplary, indeed well-rewarded, intellectual engineer of *New Labour's* project, we will firstly concentrate our attention on Mulgan’s ‘argument’ (Mulgan, 1998: 15-16). Anyone who has seen or heard Mulgan talk, or who has read anything he has written, will realise the literal sophistication of Mulgan’s rhetorical skills. He does not waste these here. Perhaps Saul’s (1992) description of how technocrats control a debate is most apt in describing Mulgan’s response to Blair’s critics:

> The classic method is to make a violent, irrational entry, which often involves personal invective. The very rudeness of the attack will stop the discussion. The technocrat then picks one or two small points - the weakest - out of the argument and concentrates all his sarcasm upon them. Such a *reductio ad absurdum* catches everyone unawares and before they can recover he *[sic]* reintroduces the debate entirely in his own manner. (Saul, 1992: 117)

Mulgan’s *ad hominem* invective opens with the words ‘special intellectuals’ (1998: 15). Hobsbawn and Hall are attributed with this seemingly laudatory epithet. One needs no intertextual reference to infer its rude intent, though, because Mulgan provides this himself: ‘Why, then, do such outstanding intellectuals [Hobsbawn and Hall] offer such thin gruel when it comes to the politics of their own society?’ (1998: 16). The answer is simple according to Mulgan:

> In the past politically committed intellectuals saw themselves as harbingers of a new world in which the economy, education, politics, and everyday life would be organised more justly. They were often argumentative, and often wrong; but they saw themselves as part of a movement for change, within society, not outside of it.

Today, by contrast, much intellectual life is becalmed. Many of the left’s best brains went into university in the 1960s and 1970s, and into a culture in which refereed journals are the main forum of discussion and critique is considered more highbrow than advocacy. Surprisingly, few intellectuals are now actively involved in society, as councillors, activists, or school governors. Instead the world is viewed through books, and through books about books. As in parts of the media, an individualised culture has taken shape in which it is easier to be cynical than to run the risks, the emotional exposure, of being committed and engaged. The result is that although there are many eloquent critics, when you ask them how they would want things to be done differently, they stutter, and mumble, and are soon reduced to silence. (1998: 16)

There you have it. These are Mulgan’s ‘special intellectuals’ in a nutshell: critical, stuttering, mumbling, non-prescriptive, people with ‘not even much idealism’ (supposedly an advantage), who read books - and worse - books about books! For Mulgan, these ‘special intellectuals’ are emotionally dissociative, uncommitted, unengaged people. Very few of these ‘special intellectuals’ are councillors or activists or school governors, therefore they ‘are not actively involved in society’. Is that, perhaps, because there are fewer funds available for schools, welfare, or for ‘activism’ that does not admit fealty to the high priests of Nexus, Demos, or the Fabians? Or is Mulgan arguing that only people in these fields can consider themselves as actively involved in society? We are unsure.

Having thoroughly mocked dissenting scholars - especially ‘the Marxists’ (*tout court!*), in whom Mulgan senses ‘the cloying atmosphere of the seminar room’, and whose politics are ancient history, as opposed (we must assume) to the fresh and vibrant policy air with which Mulgan has filled ‘10 and 11 Downing
Street' - Mulgan redefines the whole debate in a series of false choices, non-sequiturs, and self-contradictory statements. Here is a typical Mulganism:

The problems get worse when the authors discuss neo-liberalism, which they claim is all powerful. This viewpoint is, to say the least, idiosyncratic. It ignores . . . the fact that a succession of right-wing governments have been thrown out of power. . . (1998: 16)

And, we might add, much to the voting public's disappointed expectations of their successors. Right-wing neo-liberals may wear wigs which are a slightly different shade of pink than those of the new 'radical centre' (whatever that term is supposed to mean - one is reminded of an agitator in a washing machine or an electric egg beater), but they are no less neo-liberal in essence, or in their responses to perceived neo-liberal policy imperatives, such as that of the anthropomorphic global market. To put the 'radical centre's' doublethink1 in Mulgan's words, 'in a market economy, where most jobs are created by private sector investment . . . you can be either pro-jobs or anti-business. But you can't be both' (1998: 16). Can't you? Why not? Did someone say they were anti-business or pro-jobs? No. Mulgan's commitment to neo-liberal, neo-classic dogma is writ large here, albeit distorted by the technocratic sophistry of false choices, and the violence-by-nonsense under which Mulgan hides his neo-liberalism.

Ironically, in the sentence prior to the one quoted above, Mulgan says that a common fallacy of the 'special intellectuals' is the mistake they make when arguing that 'politics cannot be "both and" politics; it has to be either or' (1988: 16). His mastery of Boolean logic notwithstanding, Mulgan immediately goes on to offer an either-or political choice that, in his opinion, is valid. So what do Hobsbawm and Hall, two apparently disenfranchised figures central to the creation of New Labour, have to say?

Hobsbawm is, as ever, engaging. He starts painting his Big Picture (1998: 4-8) by drawing colours from the palette of a defiant apologist, which is as it should be. He even goes as far as to apologise for Thatcher, recommending and defending some parts of her program, although we are left unsure as to which parts he approves of the most (1998: 4-5).2 Blair's triumph - New Labour's victory - is also Hobsbawm's, and he claims it, at least partly, as his own. It is clear to Hobsbawm why Labour had to change its direction. First, the policies of the 'golden age' became archaic (agentlessly, as things do in the vulgar world), as apparently evidenced by Mitterand's failure (of course, no mention is made that Mitterand surrounded himself with power-obsessed enarques); and also, for no stated reason:

because New Labour assumed that after Thatcher political majorities depended on getting the votes of the Thatcherite middle class. Hence it had to bind itself hand and foot for five years. This may or may not be the reason why we won. (p. 5, italics added)

Hobsbawm's authorial we is, perhaps, a psychological slip. Perhaps he merely wants to claim some part of New Labour's electoral victory. Whichever, he quickly reverts in the next sentence to 'they', as he moves to disown the policies of the Blair administration. This sours the argument that Hobsbawm posits. With his victory claim, the whole thing boils down to a 'we won; but they keep doing all the wrong things' statement. Mary Shelley, long ago, pointed out that you can't have your Frankenstein and control it too. And that is the problem with co-opting socialist movements for right-wing purposes (solely for the sake of gaining power, for instance): history makes uncontrollable monsters during such processes - Bonapartes, Francos, Mussolinis, and Hitlers - all of whom have invariably succeeded by touting a 'Third Way' of one sort or another. Historically speaking, a socialist commitment to a Third Way of any kind is merely a promise to pursue power for its own sake - usually at any cost. Invariably, as Heidegger's rectoral address exemplifies, the 'Third Way' claims to be ideology-free. Hobsbawm, better than anyone, ought to know this pattern.

While we can empathise with Hobsbawm's sentiment, we cannot agree with some of his more platitudinous statements, which, when stripped of their new left sentiment (which is all the mainstream 'left' seems to be these days: a soggy pile of vapid, 'victim' sentiments that gain form and substance by being dragged repeatedly through the quagmire of identity politics) appear as hollow and shallow as the most mediocre, uncritical, neo-liberal analysis of the last 30 years. Here is an example of what we mean:

I shall say nothing about the welfare system, except . . . : one that it must be universal; two, that we must break with a system that generates welfare dependency among people of working age; three that it can no longer be - perhaps that it should not ever have been - purely a system of state transfers. (p. 7)

Here, Hobsbawm unfortunately regurgitates the 'Third Sector' policy tenets on welfare common to all modern neo-liberal political systems (cf. Reich,
1992; Rifkin, 1996; Latham, 1998; Mulgan, 1997). What we see here is the privatisation of welfare. Did he mean to say that? That is to say, if a welfare system, which is by definition a state response to circumstances of need and dependency on the part of its recipients, is not a state (i.e. public) system, it must be put into the hands of somebody else (i.e. it must be privatised). Third Sector policies are intrinsic to Third Way policies and are, in most recent years, the invention of the Bush administration (in Rifkin, 1996).4

Perhaps Mulgan is right. Perhaps Hobsbawm sees himself as somehow apart from his society - perhaps, for him, people really are things that can be bought and sold on the 'labour market', a term that Hobsbawm uses. There is no mention of any truly radical, socialist alternatives to capitalism. If Hobsbawm were ever in Mulgan's position, the best we could probably hope for would be an internationalised form of neo-Keynesian capitalism (which is most likely what we'll get anyway, and this would be a retrograde step): 'If the market is to work adequately, its systematic tendency to generate acute inequality needs to be regulated' (1998: 8). To which we must ask: "by whom?" The answer appears for Hobsbawm to lie in an international coalition of state powers - a new multilateral solution.5

This is necessary because globalisation 'deprived social democracy of its major resource, namely the ability to control what happened to and within the borders of its national economies' (1998: 4). We might turn to an historical 'conversation' in Utopia for answers to such a perennially contrived problem:

Raphael: That's exactly what I was saying - there's no room at court for philosophy. More: There's certainly no room for the academic variety, which says what it thinks regardless of circumstances. But there is a more civilised form of philosophy which knows the dramatic context, so to speak, tries to fit in with it, and plays an appropriate part in the current performance. That's the sort you should go in for. . . Surely it would better to keep your mouth shut altogether than to turn the thing into a tragicomedy by interpolating lines from another play? . . .

The same rule applies to politics and life at court. If you can't completely eradicate wrong ideas, or deal with inveterate vices as effectively as you could wish, that's no reason for your back on public life altogether. You wouldn't abandon a ship in a storm just because you couldn't control the winds. (More, 1516/1965: 65)

More, of course, aims his derision at the way sixteenth century courtesans are handling the problems caused by a few greedy people [who] have converted one of England's greatest natural advantages into a national disaster during the first round of mass expropriations in Britain (1516/1965: 48). The points More makes, especially in the paragraphs that follow the above quote, still apply almost 500 years later. And, why indeed should traditions, principles, and alliances be abandoned just because the 'cold winds that blow in from the global marketplace' (Hall, 1998: 12) blow ill for the ships of nation states? Surely the evidence of the last forty years has shown that international fora (e.g. OECD and the MAI) can be even more undemocratic, inequitable, and remote than any democratic nation state's government could ever hope to be.

For example, the US defence department (or, rather, industry), and then the World Bank, under McNamara; the disastrous hegemony of the US Foreign Affairs model developed by Kissinger; the IMF under Camdessus and his clique of neo-classical fanatics; and the massive growth in the multilateral, MBA/ENA technocratic nonsense industry have all had disastrous effects on 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries alike. Ceding power to multilateral arrangements - 'centre-left', 'radical-centre', or otherwise - is no answer; it is just another duck shoving exercise that avoids real decisions and further serves to centralise power, thus making power easier for vested interests to manipulate. And no mistake should be made about multilateralism: in its current, well-developed form, it requires nations to cede specific powers by capitulating to various agreements: the right to regulate markets, to make industry specific policies, to set interest rates, and monetary policy, and so on - all in the name of laissez faire capitalism. We cannot solve existing problems, the results of sick systemic failures, merely by globalising them.

To date, a proliferation of international organisations - the EU, IMF, OECD, WTO, ILO, to name just a few of the most visible and expensive of these - has effected very few - if any - positive changes in recent years. These organisations owe their inception to the Bretton-Woods agreement, and before that, to the League of Nations. We have had almost a hundred years to learn that governments cannot hope to effect sustained solutions for domestic crises solely in international fora. Foreign policy is a poor substitute for benevolent, democratic government.

The most insightful point that Hobsbawm makes, which also, if true, would have the eventual effect of derailing hopes for an international centre-left solution to the global market, can be found in his response in Hall's article (1998: 11). He identifies the 'globalisation' of US political ideologies - American conceptions of right and left. This is a phenomenon that has advanced invisibly, well behind the barricades of public debate. It is an almost subliminal effect. This is the real problem that needs to be
addressed by traditional Labour parties. Any historical association between the US Democrats and the US labour movement is an historical accident. The US has no labourist, which is to say Marxist, tradition in its mainstream politics. Theirs is a thoroughly liberal politics - albeit split into progressive (left) and conservative (right) liberalisms. Liberalism is a fundamental circumstance of US history. Historically speaking, Marxism was an Anglo-European response to bourgeois applications of liberal ideals which, once developed, were immediately used to attack and subjugate the working and non-working poor to capitalist purposes. Historically, too, Labourism, at least in Anglo-European countries, has its roots in Marx's thought. This historical fact leads us to suggest that the baby need not be thrown out with the bath water, so to speak. Bourgeois, laissez-faire liberalism - of any stripe - is the historical, explicit enemy of labour movements (Graham, in press).

Hall's (1998: 9-14) views are much closer to the labourist left tradition than are Hobsbawm's, but they are no less elitist. He says: 'There is still work for Demos to do!' (1998: 13). It is as if all social problems can be solved in Mulgan's leaky wonk tank once the parameters of reform are delineated (1998: 13). This is a massive abrogation of social action, and political responsibility, to ostensibly de-ideologised technocratic solutions. Hall rightly identifies Blairism as a 'variant species of "authoritarian populism"' which is 'corporate and managerialist in its "downward" leadership style and its moralising attitude to those to whom good is being done' (1998: 13). Quite so. And this is also of central concern throughout the developed and developing worlds. Because, if, as Hall points out, a supposedly socialist government 'cosies up to big business'; and its leaders become 'dedicated follower[s] of celebrity' (1998: 14); and if they are 'anti-intellectual' and 'ideology-free', as New Labour claims to be; then all that is needed is a strong dose of nationalism (which is barely latent in these days of trade and employment wars) to produce a Heideggerian education system, and everything else that goes along with it:

Heidegger understood the importance of community spirit - Volksgemeinschaft - and knew that faith, will, symbol worship, and mass communication could transform people's consciousness, especially the young. Under Heidegger, education became training; training became oriented towards community spirit, work experience (Erlebnis), and the party line. No longer would knowledge for its own sake play a part in German education. Education would mean training for work, and thus for 'authentic' citizenship. (Graham, 1999)

Whether Blair, or anyone else on the left of British politics, has forgotten the dissonant tone of the last Third Way multimedia production (Wagner scored it; Nietzsche wrote the script; Heidegger provided the symbolism and philosophy; Reifenstahl did special effects; and Eichmann made sure that the catering vans were always on time), it remains that the Third Way - socialist/corporatist consensus politics - is an historically spectacular failure. One cannot 'reconcile the irreconcilable', as Marx once said of John Stuart Mill's liberalism. 'Beyond left and right', it seems, there is only false consensus. Labour and Capital have always had conflicting interests. This has not changed, managerialism and changing forms of work notwithstanding. The class struggle has not gone away, despite Blair's official banishment; it has been redefined by theoretical nuance, huge executive salaries, and a de-radicalised intellectual atmosphere.

The central dialectic established by Hobsbawm, Hall, Jacques, and Mulgan focuses on the meaning of 'modernisation', and all agree that a certain amount of this has happened. But it would appear that 'modernisation', a gooey epithet that seems to stick to everything at which it is hurled, is as slippery a process as the 'globalisation' it seeks to address.

Some of the problems that New Labour currently encounters are inadvertently present in Suzanne Moore's 'The Cultural Revolution' (1998). She argues, sensibly, that the social and the political should not be seen as separate. Frankly, traditional socialism never saw them as separate. In Australia, the Labor Party emerged in the 1890s out of the realisation that industrial politics had to have the help of labour governments to ensure that people were paid sufficiently to put food on the table, for children to have an education, for people to have access to medical care, for retirees and widow(er)s to live in some comfort. Food, housing, education, health, men and women living in some dignity and comfort - that's social.

But the Labor Party and the union movements have been racist and sexist for most of their history. Ryan and Conlon (1975), for example, show that the Australian trade union movement was as patriarchal as capital for much of the twentieth century, failing to deal with the needs of working women. The Australian labour movement was also responsible for the White Australia Policy, an appalling policy that existed for most of the twentieth century (though it was originally a response to the blackbirding slave trade). Yet the labour movement did change: it did realise that principles of equity, justice, and democracy are nonsensical if they are limited to working white males. This is the rub. We can almost hear Moore throwing her hands up in despair - management practices that destroy the chance of family time; child care problems; changing patterns of sexuality and family structures, workplace discrimination. She claims to read this from a feminist perspective, but acknowledges the
problem of governments devolving 'power into the hands of multinationals' (1998: 21). As someone
avowedly raised on Foucault (‘we worshipped Foucault’ (1998: 17)), it is no wonder that her paper ends
with questions and not answers. Foucault certainly taught us, sensibly, that power is enacted at the
'capillaries' - in the quotidian practices of everyday life. But today, the capillaries of power are as
irrelevant as varicose veins are to a massive coronary. Patriarchal and capitalist power provide the
overarching rationalities that are inscribed in our subjectivity and apprehension of our objective
universe. If we do not read culture - especially 'popular culture' - as the most powerful means of
inscription, then we’re missing the point.

The Brave New Entrepreneur, man or woman, instantiates the myth of Americanised, neo-liberal
individualism. Don't you young people and Gen X construct their sexuality from Friends and Dawson’s
Creek? Isn't physical and material desire continually constructed through glossy magazines and silver
screens? The 'fragmentation' so often postulated by postmodernist scholars is simply another way of
describing the 'rampant individualism' that emerges from liberalism's desire for us all to pursue 'rational
self interest'. In other words, 'civic culture' has given way to 'consumer culture'. You can't be
postmodernist and also committed to civic values unless you understand the difference between
fragmentation caused by loss of solidarity of groups (workers, women, unemployed, etc.) and
fragmentation caused by the liberal choice of self interest over community interest. The implication of
this for Bauman (1993) and for Heelas (1991) is that the 'individualistic self-ethic is likely to undermine
the psychological valiancy of the relational "other directed", moral fabric' that is implied in active
citizenship (Heelas, 1991: 85). In other words, let's stop the political inertia caused by postmodernist
agnosticism about grand narratives, simulacrous 'reality', aleatory meaning, and so on. Sure, let's
recognise that everything is contingent, that we don't know 'the truth', that life is heterodox --
unpredictable. Life has never been any different in this respect. Let's avoid slipping into postmodern
nihilism or insipid Rortyan liberalism. Let's put some stakes in the ground: massive inequality is wrong;
violence against people is wrong; the environmental degradation of our planet is wrong. We want to stop it
and we want to stop it now. To do other than that is to fall into the narcissistic, intellectual wankery of
which Mulgan is exemplary. That is, we should re-establish fundamental principles that clearly separate
decent politics from the nasty, greedy, and destructive politics of neo-liberalism.

Clearly such political principles would assume that sex or ethnicity are simply irrelevant when asserting
that good societies are those that display trust, fairly distribute resources, accept social pluralism, and
promote social cohesion (Mckenna, in press). It is pleasing, then, to see that David Held is able to read
the contemporary political discourse effectively. If more so-called labourists could state as simply as he
does 'that markets left to their own devices neglect social solidarity, social cohesion, and social justice'
(1998: 24), then the political problem might become clearer to a confused and disenchanted electorate.
He rightly points out that Blair's New Labour 'embraced a particular conception of globalisation' that has
been in place since Thatcher and Reagan ruled the world. As well, 'New Labour has all too often gone
along with this consensus' (1998: 25). Contradicting Mulgan's claim that leftist academics simply read
books about books, Held actually proposes five measures that social democratic governments should
undertake to materially break the neo-classical, neo-liberal hegemony that has hurt us for far too long.
Similarly Will Hutton's 'Big Boom Bang' pulls no punches: 'The free marketeers have brought the world
to the brink of a slump' (1998a: 29). His action plan is clear: 'a complete reconstruction of the world
financial system and the principles upon which it is founded' (1998a: 29).

Left wing critics such as Hutton (1998b: 34-37) and Richard Wilkinson (1998: 38-39) state clear
propositions and demand clear socialist actions that cut through the miasma of postmodern confusion
and inaction. The 'forces arguing for equality have been all but stilled' in New Labour, says Hutton. Both
Hutton and Wilkinson identify the concrete effects of inequality on people's lives: breaking social trust
and our ability to empathise; threatening individual liberty; and shrinking the common public and, more
importantly, public spaces. Wilkinson is even more clear: inequality kills poor people and causes feelings
of inferiority related to violent crime. It is inexcusable that a new overclass of executives, professionals,
and directors earn obscenely high incomes while pensioners are unable to obtain even basic health and
housing. It is inexcusable that the current mindset in New Labour would never have the political will of
Old Labour to establish or maintain a National Health Service or the BBC. Hutton's socialist agenda re-
introduces some fundamental and sensible government actions: regulation, especially the financial
system, a workable and fair tax system, equalised access to education, extended welfare, capital
investment in hospitals and schools, controls over international finance.

The re-issue of Marxism Today should provide some sort of political landmark for a broadened socialism
to re-group for an assault on neo-liberal politics and neo-classical economics. Clearly we should reject
those intellectual features of postmodernism that conveniently allow us to read human misery as
simulacrous, culturally relative 'lifestyle choices': tell that to suicidal or brutalised unemployed people; to
farmers unable to grow crops because rivers have dried up; or to terrified political and ethnic refugees
escaping murder and rape.
Perhaps we can no longer ask people to support the interests of a dwindling group of unionised workers in an 'old' Labour Party. So be it. But the humanitarian, egalitarian, and democratic principles that gave rise to Labour and Democratic Socialist parties must now deal with a new form of internationalised, digital capitalism, and must provide new, more forceful answers for the many injustices that have historically bedevilled our societies. The left needs to promote an end to violence, hunger, and homelessness; it needs to promote unmitigated economic and social and equality, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or sex; and it needs to end the environmental degradation engendered by unchecked advances in industrial technology. By meeting such commitments, the morass of postmodern 'identity' politics will hopefully become as irrelevant to the left as it ought to be.

**Endnotes**

1. We refer here, of course, to Orwell's (1949) 1984.

2. 'This is the justification of modernising Labour. This is also the reason why no Labour Party which managed to get itself elected could be expected simply to reverse everything Thatcher had done: some of it, most people will agree, needed doing' (Hobsbawm, 1998: 4-5). And, we might add, you can fool most of the people all of the time, but not vice versa.

3. David Rowan's light-hearted, but thoughtful, piece points out that 'new' was used 107 times in Labour's draft election manifesto (1998: 22).


5. '. . .there is a possibility of co-ordinated action by several governments' (1998: 7).


7. This, even though Marx wrote that the contradictions inherent in the capitalist division of labour are, in the first instance, based on the 'latent slavery in the family'. Unequal distribution is a property of this 'first form, of which lies in the family, where the wife and children are the slaves of the husband' (Marx, 1846/1972: 123). Further references by Marx about the distress and inequitable outcomes of laissez-faire capital emphasise that in 'branches of industry without legal limits to exploitation', women and children appear to suffer most of all (Marx, 1976: esp. pp. 353-358).

**References**


