New Times: the Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s
Edited by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques

Most of the essays included in this volume have appeared over the last few years in Marxism Today. They have been greeted, inside and outside the left, as reflecting a political turning point. New Times marks an optimistic upturn in left thinking despite ten years of Thatcherism. The critical term here is that of 'facing up' to the new times. There is a determination to extend the vocabulary of socialism into areas of public and private life which have, until recently, existed beyond the boundaries of left politics. The New Timers have much to thank feminists and the gay movement for in this respect. It was feminists, for example, who first insisted on the importance of analysing pleasure, rather than simply feeling guilty about it. This included small everyday pleasures as well as larger social festivities and celebrations. Likewise, much of the new emphasis on style, consumerism and on the use of these in the carving out of a distinct social identity, came out of gay politics. It was both of these groups who insisted that if politics was to be worth the effort, if it was to be a lifelong commitment, it had to be fun, and even if it could not be fun all the time, then at least it should not be punitive, self-denying or puritan. Far from being a sign of collusion with capitalism, making domestic life pleasurable through attending to 'home decoration', and taking pleasure in 'self-decoration', were gestures which created within capitalism and within consumer culture 'personalized spaces' which were active rather than passive, negotiated rather than simply received. These pleasurable practices of everyday life were important precisely because of their immediacy, their tangible existence in the here-and-now. Finally, and most importantly, it was the recognition of the right to enjoyment and pleasure which by the mid-eighties seemed to connect some of the left, many feminists and many gay men, with the broader mass of the people. It was the shared pleasure of key television programmes, of certain social and cultural activities (for example, the
pleasures of parenthood,) or of the ‘culture of narcissism’ (sport and personal style) which, ironically perhaps, provided the link between the ‘unpopular’ left and an electorate which had voted en masse for a radical right-wing government three times in a row. This in turn became part of a wider political project, to tap into the sources of ‘popular’ needs, to understand the success of the Tories’ ‘populism’, and to attempt to reconstruct a ‘new times’ left politics which was better able to take into account these social needs while maintaining the commitment to social democracy, social equality and social justice. This kind of new-left populism has been welcomed and endorsed by sectors of the Labour Party, (to the extent that some now see Marxism Today as the theoretical wing of Labour), it has been dubbed ‘designer socialism’ by the Guardian, and has been dismissed as left-Thatcherism by the hard left.

The New Times manifesto goes further than this, however. Published before the tumultuous events in Eastern Europe, the articles in this volume none the less envisage deep-rooted changes in society, in production, consumption, class alignment, and social identity, such that nothing short of a complete reassessment of left theory and practice is required. The enthusiasm and verve with which these writers confront this challenge, and the sheer adventurousness of their thinking is to be welcomed. The collection, for the first time in many years, gives the impression of a ‘Real Left’ dialogue, theoretically informed without being theoreticist, and intellectually engaged without being elitist. As the editors explain, New Times reflects an open-ended discourse. It asks many more questions than it answers. None the less it is also the case that this is a collection where feminism is foregrounded as a movement but otherwise conspicuous by its absence. In 1990, when feminism seems to have achieved so much, it feels mean-spirited and somehow unfair to point to the few women contributors to this volume. More useful, perhaps, to ask the question: why? Is the new-times project relevant but tangential to the concerns of feminists today? Are academic feminists engaging with many of the same issues as the New Timers but in an intellectual rather than an immediately political context? Is Marxism Today less of a forum for feminist ideas than it was only a few years ago? More contentiously, has New Times moved ‘beyond feminism’ in the same way that it might be argued it has moved ‘beyond marxism’?

If this is the case then New Times might be seen as connecting to debates about ‘postmodernity’. It could be argued that what postmodernism is to American, Australian and European left intellectuals, New Times is to their UK counterparts. In both there is a tide of dissidence, an undercurrent of challenge to some of the guiding precepts of socialist and Marxist thought. In postmodernism this entails a full-scale onslaught on the meta-narratives of history, of which Marxism is one. In New Times it means a more gentle process of transforming socialist ideals to bring them further into line with questions of individual choice, of personal freedom and of social and civic responsibility. The major issue, however, which underpins this new times thinking is that shift in production away from mass manufacturing, the classic Fordist mode of production which has characterized ‘modern’ capitalism, towards a means of production which has been labelled post-Fordist and which some have argued is also a postmodern means of production.

The growth of new computer technology, the search for greater profits, the attempt to exert greater control over labour, the need to produce a greater diversity of goods and to produce for a more segmented global market . . . all of these forces
have created post-Fordism. In fact this label covers a diversity of modes. As Paul Hirst points out in his critique of *New Times* (also included in the volume), the problem with post-Fordism as it is defined here, is that it is seen as market-led. That is to say, because people seem to want different and differentiated goods and commodities and because it is now possible, thanks to new technology, to produce such goods by adapting the technology to ‘small lines’, then first the old production lines go, and with them the working class who was their ‘product’. Hirst argues that ‘flexible specialisation’ is a more useful term. This is what he calls an ‘ideal type of manufacturing process’, a ‘technological paradigm or model of industrial efficiency: the manufacture of a range of specialised goods for particular and changing markets using flexible general purpose machinery and predominantly skilled labour’. Hirst argues, against the New Timers, that neither flexible specialisation nor post-Fordism are widespread in the UK and that these are the products of a planned capitalist economy where politics and economics are more tightly synchronized than they have ever been under the *laissez-faire*, free-market preferences of the present government.

For most of the New Timers it is, however, post-Fordism which symbolizes most aptly the changing landscape of class and social identity in contemporary Britain and which articulates with those popular desires for ‘customized’ rather than mass-produced consumer goods, for ‘lifestyle’ rather than for ‘class culture’, for quality ‘retailing’ (Next, Benetton) rather than quantity ‘selling’ (C and A). These processes have indeed dramatically transformed the field of leisure and culture in the 1980s and into the 1990s. In this respect New Times politics is as much a necessity for the left as an act of political imagination. In every conceivable way the old class map of the UK has been broken up. Class de-alignment has corresponded with the emergence of new social populations and representative bodies with their own interests, and their own political agendas. These groups include women, ethnic groups, regional groups, youth groups, the poor and the new underclass, gays and lesbians, and others. There is a correspondence, then, between a change in production and a change in culture. What connects each of these sets of changes is the decline of the unified, homogeneous grouping, the end of the ‘mass’. Emergent bodies blur the old lines of party affiliation, and transform the traditional notion of party loyalty. As a result New Times also means social unpredictability, loss, confusion and even bewilderment, particularly when taken alongside the rapid changes in communication and the further penetration of everyday life by ‘communicative networks’ including computers and other forms of mass media.

*New Times* is then a response to the scope and the scale of these changes. But there still remains the question of what these new times might mean for women. ‘Identity politics’ seems at points to substitute for feminist issues, but they too are obscured. Feminism is duly acknowledged by all and sundry and yet it is an absent presence. This can be interpreted in a number of ways. Optimistically, feminism has won through. It has so thoroughly entered the political vocabulary not just of the New Timers but of all politically progressive forces that the point need hardly be made. The women’s movement, as a movement without a leader, a grouping without a party structure, was pre-figurative and all the more well placed to enter into the mainstream of ‘good sense’. Cynically, the absence of a greater number of feminist contributions to this collection might be seen as a means of avoiding a more angry, more strident note. Culture, leisure
and consumption take the place of domestic labour, reproduction and child care. Ironically the New Timers get to these new concepts through pleasure. But in doing so they go overboard for leisure and enjoyment and conveniently 'forget' the displeasure of a good deal of 'shopping' (at the end of a day's work with two young children in tow), the disappointment of consumption (when the new dress so quickly loses its appeal) and the distress of not being able to afford an occasional 'treat', because the mortgage, or the Poll Tax, or the dentist's bill has to be paid. Realistically, the absence might be seen as a reflection of the status of these contributions as 'position papers' whose brief is to move on from the concepts which have dominated left thinking over the last few years, and, drawing loosely on feminist debates and issues, to draw up a new 'integrative' vocabulary where social categories, social movements other than those of class, are, by implication, in the ascendant.

New Times falls into a number of sections. The first of these charts the significance of what Stuart Hall sees as the overturning of all of those settlements which have come to be the hallmark of post-war UK society. The disintegration of these economic, social, gender, racial, regional, environmental and national settlements has created an unprecedented moment of rupture. For Hall, the critical issue is not that these changes are all reflective of a worsening crisis but that the 'terms upon which a new era will be moulded' are as yet unclear. Robin Murray, in turn, reminds us that post-Fordism creates a core of well-paid workers and a periphery of workers who are insecure, underpaid and marginalized. At present, women constitute a large proportion of periphery workers, at best in 'professional' casualized work and at worst in sub-contracted homework. The fruits of the new consumer culture for these women are attenuated, the involvement in leisure and the enjoyment of domesticity heavily circumscribed by financial insecurity and dependence on a male breadwinner. Dick Hebdige decries the loss of connection and the lack of belonging which postmodern culture celebrates but sees none the less in this new state the possibility of new emergent disconnected forces coming to the surface. He sees this in, for example, the cut-up sounds and 'stolen' noises of rap and hip hop. He also sees a transitory sense of connectedness in, rather than in spite of, the mass media and through the global music events on TV in aid of Ethiopia, or against apartheid. Finally, he sees in culture evidence of this breaking-up of consensus and unity. The spaces created are, he argues, full of potential rather than, as Baudrillard would have it, 'fatal' or 'finished'. Stuart Hall also welcomes the 'unsettling effect' which feminism and the new social movements have had on 'everything once thought of as "settled"' in the theoretical universe of the Left.

In Section Two, a socialist case is made for moving beyond the old language of collectivism into 'identity' politics which at once taps those popular desires for choice and individuality but which also extend the repertoire for local democratic representation through citizenship. Once again, since feminism has emphasized participation in spheres far beyond those of the workplace (in the community, the nursery, the city and more recently in consumer politics), this emphasis is to be welcomed. A fuller consideration of these new public spheres and the extent to which feminism first 'publicized' them, is, however, missing. Section Three charts the connections between local, national and global identities, and Section Four gives space to the critics of New Times. This includes Mike Rustin who argues that 'Thatcherism may be understood as a strategy of post-Fordism initiated from the perspective of the Right'. The implication is that post-Fordism is therefore a
wholly bad thing. In contrast, Paul Hirst insists that ‘flexible specialisation’ requires much closer cooperation between ‘companies and public bodies’, implying that such a strategy, were it to exist in the UK, might be a good thing. The final two sections of New Times describe the decline of party politics (Sarah Benton) and in its place the ascendancy of ‘weak politics’ (Geoff Mulgan). The concluding Manifesto of New Times, searches among the ruins for a ‘new political language’ but it is left to Beatrix Campbell to introduce into this volume not so much a new language as a few snatches of the voices of some of those who have been uprooted by New Times. In a series of visits to different towns across the UK, including Basingstoke, Sheffield, Livingston and Swindon, Campbell comes close to capturing the unevenness and complexity of such changes. In Livingston, an American company producing computers operates Japanese-style management practices. The company designates everyone staff, sponsoring higher education, offering the same holidays to everyone, providing free cancer screening, a smart gym on site and private health insurance. But in Livingston there are no facilities, hardly any shops and no Marks and Spencers. In Sheffield there are ‘Shops, shops, shops’. But the women who work in the shops have ‘no rights because their hours aren’t long enough, and no union because nobody ever told them they’ve got rights worth defending anyway’. And finally, in Swindon a fascinating sign of the feminization of work, and indeed of the cultural and social maelstrom of New Times/postmodernity, can be seen in one company’s willingness to take on the unemployed fathers of some of their younger female workforce. ‘I’ve done my stint of the manly jobs’, says John Perkins who used to work at Austin Rover’s car plant . . . “Fortunately I had two daughters working at Allied Dunbar.” Perkins had been a shop steward at Austin Rover. He is no longer in a union.’ (p. 293) This example of an unemployed man who finds a new job, thanks to his daughters, graphically conveys the new ‘structure of feeling’ as well as the new social organization of labour which are the products of New Times. The New Times volume provides a force-field for understanding Britain during, and now, perhaps, after Thatcher. Beatrix Campbell’s journey through the New Times towns conveys something of the lived experience of these years, and something of what they have meant for women. But it is a lonely voice in a ‘new’ vocabulary which gestures to feminism while shying away from considering more precisely its future.

Angela McRobbie

Notes
1 See, for example, Annie Phizacklea, Unpacking the fashion industry (Methuen, 1990) and Mica Nava, ‘Consumerism reconsidered: buying and power’, paper presented to the BSA Conference, April 1990.

Woman-Nation-State
Edited by Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias

It may well have taken the ‘Rushdie affair’ to fully bring home the fact that England, and indeed Britain generally, is now a multiethnic and multiracial society with differing and sometimes sharply conflicting cultural and religious values. British feminism in the long tradition of native radical movements such as trades unionism, socialism and communism has exhibited a strong tend-