

Common Sense

Peter Kennedy

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Politics of Need: Locating the Dialectic
Between Identity and Difference

Athena Athanasiou

Colonial Anthropology: An Enlightenment
Legacy? The Lockean Discourse on Nature,
Social Order and Difference

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Marxism: an obituary of Guy Debord

plus Dialogues, Interviews
& Review Article

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Reflections on Social Movements & the Politics of Need: Locating the Dialectic Between Identity & Difference

Peter Kennedy

1. Introduction

During the past two decades the face of anti-capitalist political protest has been transformed. While traditional forms of working class collectivism - trade unions, political parties of the left - were apparently failing to transform capitalism into a classless society, other social movements have taken up the struggle to provide new visions of possible futures. Black and ethnic minorities; women's movements and Environmentalist movements of variable political shades, have increasingly distanced themselves from what is often seen as a forced identity with 'class struggle'. Instead they celebrate their unique *differences* as a way of expressing their *identities*. This is to be welcomed. People are uniquely different in terms of the ethical perceptions they have, moral codes of conduct they choose to live by and cultural values they express. Indeed there are differences *within* the movements mentioned above on how to create a more democratic and environmentally safe society. For example, sections within the black movement struggle for civil rights and integration into the wider community of capitalism; other sections struggle for segregation, despairing of 'ingrained white prejudice'. What springs to mind here, with respect to the latter, is the perceived failure, amongst the dispossessed blacks of North America, of civil rights politics and the growing desire they feel - witnessed by the recent 'million man march' through Washington DC - that segregation is the ultimate solution. There are also differences *within* the women's movement, between Marxist Feminists; Feminist Marxists; and Radical Feminists, as to the causes of women's oppression and the 'correct' solution. The differences *within* the Environmental movement are even more variegated; from mainstream Parliamentary Greens, to deep ecologists, green anarchists, eco-feminists, to green socialists (in no apparent order of 'left-right').

Clearly there are profound differences within each movement; differences which often foster *identities* of interest *between* sections from each movement (as in the example of eco-feminism). For example,

each particular movement has groups who reject the State, parliamentary democracy and class politics; on the basis of which a common interest in local, spontaneous self organisation, with groups from other movements can transpire.¹ Again, whilst making clear a condemnation of the overtly reformist groups within these movements, one can welcome them as a *potentially* progressive and liberating force based on an anti-capitalist united front. Anti-capitalists unreservedly support direct environmental action, at Pollock Park and Newbury, for example, to defend the country side and traditional community life from the State's irrational desire to 'girdle the globe with roads'.² Just as one must join and defend blacks, ethnic minorities and women in their struggle and on largely their terms of reference too. The message must surely be learnt by now that capitalism may fetishise individuals as homogeneous abstract identities, but anti-capitalist forces should not! Yet the social movements, quite correctly argue that much of what has passed for 20th century Marxism and 'communism', has done just this. This experience (of which more explanation below), in conjunction with the belief that traditional class based politics are now history, has served to deflect the class resolve of even those who still adhere to some aspects of Marxist analysis within the social movements. Thus, despite all the differences, it can justifiably be said there is of late a broad identity of agreement, that any overlapping alliances, can only be temporary in time and space and populist in character. In other words, gone are the days of 'united front, class based, politics', because the claim of a more substantial class unity *over and above* the concrete struggles of the movement, are seen as nothing more than a chimera. This paper will argue that there is an urgent need for a political movement that can combine a dialectic of difference in unity, based on the politics of social need. In what follows, the paper will explain why social movements have distanced themselves from much of what has passed for 20th century Marxism. After which I discuss the negative implications of the current attraction to the discourse of modernity-post modernity, for the successful execution of an anti-capitalist project. Finally, a re-interpretation of crucial aspects of Marxism, provides the basis for an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism and an emergent politics of social need.

2

Twentieth century Marxism has been corrupted by two forces. Firstly, the practice of social evolutionism and the methodology of positivism which began to infect Marxism during the latter half of the 19th century; mainly in response to social changes in the composition of labour and capital. Production had become more socialised and capitalist forces, as one consequence, became that much more willing to consider social reform, to circumvent the influence of new unionism and syndicalism amongst key sections of the working class, in order to control a faltering capitalist society and eradicate the threat from labour. Marxists of the Second International were, fatally, to view this trend as evidence of capitalism's peaceful transition to socialism. Secondly, and much more

profound in its negative affects on working class politics, was Stalinism.³ Once the project of communism had imploded in the Soviet Union, a form of Stalinist Marxism emerged in the Soviet Union, eventually integrating itself within the heartlands of Western Marxism. The combined effect of these two events (evolutionary socialism and Stalinism), debilitated the working class movement politically, impaired the Marxist analysis of class struggle and confine a more theoretical account of 'the law of value' to the metaphysical status of a concept - as I will explain below.

The twin notions of, on the one hand, the inevitability of 'socialism' and, on the other hand, the doctrine of 'socialism in one country', confined the parameters of a Marxist understanding of social transformations occurring in the class structure during the 20th century.⁴ For example, once Stalinism, as the praxis of 'socialism in one country', had consolidated itself in the East, its influence deepened amongst the western left. Thus the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Labour Party, although (outwardly) hostile to each other, saw eye to eye on their peculiar notion of what 'socialism in Britain' should look like: one of class collaboration, adherence to State control of industry and 'the National interest'. Arthur Horner and Abe Moffat in their joint roles as leading members of the CPGB and the National Union of Mineworkers, personified this brand of Marxism at its peak in the 1940s and 50s. Horner sang praises to Stalinist Marxism's class collaborationist content and economistic nature, when speaking about the Nationalised industry to which he was linked; 'Basing ourselves on the class consciousness of the mining community and its responsibility for the existence of a labour Government, we are calling for the co-operation of men and management in this common endeavour. In other words, the manpower of the industry, which must of necessity include managers and supervisors, as well as workmen..must now realise that they can no longer afford to regard each other as enemies, but rather as servants of the State called upon to undertake vital services on its behalf'.⁵ For Stalinist Marxism, state planning, conveniently, became conflated with 'communism', which was then abstractly opposed to 'the market' and so 'capitalism'. So long as the market and the 'plan' remained separate theoretically, and practically reified as a technical and strictly 'economic' mode of discourse, then the type of class collaboration, expressed by Horner above, could become the accepted norm for 'socialism'.

Of course many Western Marxists fiercely resisted the world view of Stalinist Marxism, as witnessed by the variety of responses from the Frankfurt School to the splintering of Trotskyist groupings around the failed Fourth International. It must be said, however, that, in their efforts to resist Stalinist influence, they too became caught in its extensive theoretical web of flawed and reified 'Marxism' (albeit in crucially different ways). For example, despite the Frankfurt School's tremendous insights into the alienated social psyche of 'one-dimensional man' entrapped by 'instrumental rationality', it prematurely rejected Marx's value theory of labour, on the basis that adherence to it had been the basis for the development of Stalinism. In rejecting the centrality of

the value theory of labour, the Frankfurt School cut a pathway to Weber and a particular critique of modernity which has found general resonance today amongst anti-capitalist social movements (I return to the potentially negative ramifications of this move later).

The more 'orthodox' Western Marxism from Lukacs, Gramsci, to Althusser (despite obvious methodological and substantive differences in emphasis) remained faithful to the labour theory of value. However, they, and subsequent followers,⁶ proceeded to reify it as a timeless universal law; without growth development or decay. In affect their conception of the 'law of value' becomes part of a positive epistemology; a phenomenological concept with no other purpose than to regulate and order empirical observations of the 'class struggle'. The 'class struggle becomes reduced to an economistic *function* of the pushes and pulls of 'long waves of accumulation', 'falling and rising rates of profits', 'rising organic compositions of capital', etc, all designed to increase surplus value extraction. One has only to scan the published debates amongst Marxist economists during the 1970s and early 1980s, to realise something had gone amiss; increasingly, it appeared workers needed a mathematical background to 'understand' class position! The economism, which had infested an understanding of class, became the breeding ground for the implicit and explicit intolerance by many Marxist sects to oppressed groups striving to air any political differences which could not be *directly* and *neatly* assimilated to 'class location'. For example, the tendency to deride, as a reflex action, the politics of those experiencing different forms of oppression, such as women and blacks, as *inherently* reformist.

Such economism lead to the enforcement of an *abstract class identity*, in the sense that all focus on *difference* was obliterated and stifled. The stifling of difference resulted in social movements expressing their identity in terms different to class. The subsequent decline of the USSR *materially* weakened the force of Stalinist influence within Marxism; a process which, potentially, could have led to a re-orientation of class praxis along a more socially rich dialectic of *identity in difference* (a concept I return to below). However, the decline of Stalinism's negative influence also corresponded with the rise of monetarism, privatisation and the recommodification of work; in short, with the resurgence of an offensive by capitalist forces across the western industrialised world against the collectivist institutions of the so-called Keynesian Welfare State. Events which meant that the social structures, which had nurtured if not exactly nourished class formation, were in disarray by the early 1980s, under the influence of globalisation. As a result there appeared to be less *material* reasons for oppressed groups to remain within the ideological orbit of class politics. In summation; due to the economism of Stalinist influenced Marxism and the decline of class politics, social movements broke free of the constraints of 'class' and embraced the politics of difference. The repulsion from Marxism was to be matched by the attraction of some social movements to the socially contextualising principles of 'Modernity' and 'Post Modernity'; an attraction which, I argue below, leaves social movements politically disarmed in the face of a powerful

global capitalism, confident in its ability to assert its negative identity on society and the environment.

3

Social movements such as the women's movement, black and environmental movements, have turned increasingly towards a discourse defined by modernity and post modernity, in an effort to establish an emancipatory project. There are, I would argue, inherent problems with this. The 'modernity-post modernity' discourse, although pulling social movements away from the confines of economic and so abstract class identity, leaves no *social grounding* for the re-establishment of a politics of identity which can match the power of capitalism. Moreover, the modernity-post modernity discourse, in treating capitalism and communism as equal evils in the manifestation of industrialism and instrumental rationality,⁷ is ultimately reformist and a harbinger of the politics of despair.

Modernism as a praxis is frustratingly difficult to identify. Suspiciously it is said to have developed at the same time as capitalism – during the 17th century – which leads one to question what the difference is supposed to be? Driven by 'instrumental reason', modernism, it is claimed, universalises all aspects of social life, in the sense that local morals, ethics and cultures are suppressed and exist in distorted form under its sway. Thus, modernity, in emitting universal morals and ethics based on utility and abstract 'rights' and 'obligations', which bear reference only to an abstract 'rational economic man', oppresses, confines and marginalises alternative ways of life.⁸ In economics and industry, instrumental reason, in the form of 'Fordism', 'scientific management' and mass production, trammels different labour processes, stripping away any intrinsic creativity.⁹ Symbiotically with production, localised consumption norms and differences become suppressed under the welter of mass consumption of one-dimensional products. The catastrophic implications for man's alienation from nature this implies, has been well documented by Environmentalists.¹⁰ In modernity-governed politics, different social groups are, apparently, suppressed and ground into an abstraction – *class* – and provided with equally abstract 'representative democracy'. The eighteenth and nineteenth century political economy and moral philosophy of those such as John Locke, Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx, provide copious examples of this trend within modernity, it is claimed.

The destructive powers of 'modernity', as indicated above, are not to be equated solely with capitalism; modernity has promoted the development of rational forms of social organisation, which includes capitalism, but does not exhaust it. As members of the Frankfurt School were later to accept, Communism has been a prime culprit, for did not 'communism' in the East become entranced by 'scientific management' too.¹¹ Conflating any possible distinction between capitalism and communism has political ramifications; the only option for critical discourse is an abstract opposition to modernity, an opposition which grounds itself in the glorification of difference, fluidity, ambiguity,

irrationalism; anything which appears as offering escape from the evils of 'modernity'. This opposition has become loosely defined as post modernism.

Post modernity endorses the subjective. In doing so, a philosophical disposition is created which views the world as the outcome of *discontinuous* and relativistic cultures, morals and ethics; not having any ontological primacy over another, merely the subject's own preferential primacy. Any attempt to deal in the social currency of universal discourses and notions that differences exist only by virtue of their dialectical relation with identities, is tantamount to reductivist philosophy and authoritarian practice: is tantamount to 'modernity'! Historical progression is anathema to the post modernist because notions of social 'laws' are deemed to be the project of positivistic scientism and, as such, little more than a 'succession of regularities'. The world of the post modernist is a world where 'the surface flux of historical process cannot disclose a deeper level of reality accessible to an emancipatory critique and a progressive praxis'.¹² Those entranced by post modernism, according to Pepper, exude, '...a new, Rousseavian, regard for non rational thought and for other cultures and points of view and for eclectic styles and outlooks...'.¹³ In effect, the 'objective world' is just a reification born of instrumental rationality (ironically, itself a reification), which embraces other 'reifications', such as 'meta-theories' and, of course, notions of a universal emancipatory working class.

The influence of post modernism has had a crucial impact on the political activity of some new social movements. For example, the hypersensitivity to *differences* and relativistic world views characteristic of post modernist discourse, often establishes reactionary boundaries on the emancipatory, anti-capitalist project. Once into the post modernist world view, no identity is safe from apparently infinitesimal reduction to still further differences. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, questions the whole notion of a black identity, biological, social structural, cultural, or otherwise. Black identity is a social discourse no more no less.¹⁴ Butler argues the same for women's 'identity' – a language fiction, no more no less! Butler would argue 'that...identity as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement'.¹⁵ Whilst not all social movements adhere to post modernist theory, their blanket anti-modernist standpoint often leads to anarchistic politics, which are ultimately no match for the centralised power resources open to the forces of capital. The task of co-ordinating an anti-capitalist front on the basis of the modernity post-modernity philosophical continuum, which celebrates atomistic individualism, not collective action, would appear to be an almost impossible one. I would suggest the low level and fragmented nature of anti-capitalist struggle today, is in no small measure to do with the philosophical and political cul de-sac opened up by the modernity-post modernity discourse.

The fragmentation into a multiplicity of possible identities can result in the kind of nihilistic observations characteristic of Baudrillard: 'Post modernity is the attempt to reach a point where one can live with

what is left. It is more of a survival among the remnants than anything else'.¹⁶ Truly, without a standpoint in identity, one derives the politics of limited horizons; the politics of 'survival among the remnants'. As Pepper notes, 'Green politics often lacks structure and coherence, reject authority and embrace cultural relativism. Therefore, Green politics have much in common with post modernism. They reject universals..being imposed on groups, in favour of self determination, and they reject, in green theorising, the hidden and structural in favour of the superficial'.¹⁷ Radical environmentalists would no doubt argue that this is the point: modernity created rigid universal 'truths' to suppress the emergence of an intimate relation between individuals and the environment; therefore, the fight against modernity must embrace subjectivity, irrationality and plurality.

The rejection of *universal identity* is theoretically erroneous and practically damaging. Individuals develop within a social ontology which exudes a dialectic of difference through universal identity; an anti-capitalist politics must embrace this. The conflict between capital and labour is, fundamentally, a conflict over capital's attempt to crush labour into an *abstract universal* (abstract labour), and labour's ongoing struggle to establish itself as a concrete universal force in the world (thus abolishing itself as a class). If social movements continue to operate a praxis along the continuum of modernity-post modernity, which denies universal identity, against the centralised power of capitalism, which has no doubts about its ability and need to assert its global identity, then the future can only lead to the politics of despair. The next section re-introduces key aspects of Marx's discourse with the aim of strengthening the case for a politics based on labour as a concrete universality.

4

Marx's critique of capitalism was, simultaneously, a critique of the exploitation of labour by capital *and* the corruption of the essence of man's metabolic mediation with nature. Labour (sensuous human productive activity) and its result - 'objectification' (the realisation of social needs), were, for Marx, the negational ground through which the humanisation of nature and naturalisation of man occurred. Marx in this respect took his substantive cue from Aristotle. He accepted the Aristotelian claim that society (or the Polis) had a purpose, or *telos*. Its purpose was to realise the 'good life': to live (thereby to realise material social needs) and to 'live well' (thereby realising man's spiritual, intellectual and practical needs). Central to Marx was how, through mediation with nature, man's social needs are defined, redefined and, in class divided society, corrupted. Marx's definition of social needs was broadly similar to that of Aristotle's. Social needs have two broad interrelative aspects; firstly, core well-being, secondly, self-realising agency. Core well-being refers to the need for survival and physical and psychological health. A safe, clean and considerate relationship to the natural environment, would be fundamental to the achievement of core well-being. Self realising agency refers to the development of central human capacities, such as projectivity (species activity) and affectivity

(capacity to express friendship and fellowship).¹⁸

Marx's essential gripe was that capitalist social relations alienated *labour* and vilified the act of *objectification*, subordinating both labour capacity/creativity and objectification to the imperatives of accumulating profit. Capitalist society is, by definition, incapable of meeting these social needs. The result is that both man and nature inevitably become de-humanised and denaturalised respectively: transformed into so much private property (in the form of capital). As Marx explains, 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it - when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. - in short when it is used by us'.¹⁹ In other words, suppressed by the fetishistic drive to accumulate profits, social and natural needs have been reduced to the satisfaction of egocentric 'utility maximisation'. Capitalist society, has 'transformed the personality structure - the values, needs and behaviour of individuals - in a way that binds 'one-dimensional man' to the social order that produces these needs'.²⁰

Many radical social movements would no doubt find common agreement with these sentiments. However, it is when Marxists then go on to assert that the 'stupid one sidedness' has a common source - class exploitation - and a common solution - a classless society - that political disagreement manifests. For Marx, humanity would only successfully move towards a classless society, if *different social movements* could *unite as a class* in order to extinguish the profit motive and rejuvenate social need. Given the current unpopularity of class discourse, it would appear to be a vital task for Marxism, if its views concerning the centrality of class are to be taken seriously, to re-clarify the relationship *within* class and *between* class, profit and social need. A small contribution can be made by going back to basics.

At the heart of capitalism is the determination to *sublate* use value and needs into exchange value and maximum profitability. Instrumental reason and 'modernity' is the result, not the cause, of this fetishism, in as much as differential social needs and useful labour activity become distorted and subordinated to the needs of capitalism to create exchange value. When Marx spoke of commodity production relations he used the expression in its widest sense - as a society wide discourse. The heart of the commodity form was its dual purpose: as use value and exchange value. Hence society wide discourse embodied the contradiction between action expressing intrinsic useful activity and social need, and instrumental reasoning based on the cash nexus. While many may agree with this, the view, also expressed by Marx, that this contradiction is one of class struggle, to be fought out by capitalist and proletariat, has been seen by many as narrowly 'economistic'. Indeed (as mentioned earlier in this paper), 'class struggle' has tended, during the course of the 20th century, to degenerate into economism, yet this was not Marx's conception. For Marx, the opposition was both clear and profound: between a capitalist class and associate forces, on the one hand, who worked to ensure that exchange value and profitability continued it's dominance over social needs; and a proletariat, on the

other hand, who strove to resist the erosion of social need and extend their control over their environment.

Marx had no illusions about the *differentiation* within the proletariat, over the relative importance of various needs and moral discourses; in fact Marx's own personal struggle for communist society was a struggle to establish social conditions within which these differences could flourish (and where the condition of 'proletariat' would be abolished). What Marx was clear about however, was this: within a political movement based on social need, the proletariat had a *unity* of interests *against* capitalism's fetishistic drive for profitability; and in *freeing* the differential expression of social needs from capital's negative orbit; despite the rich differences in the experience of oppression and exploitation on the basis of race, gender and sexuality, Marx was optimistic that a united opposition to capitalism would emerge on the basis of the politics of need. Identity politics (not in the abstract but in the concrete) which has at its basis the politics of social need has, unfortunately, been eliminated from the discourse of post modernism. However, capitalist forces have had no such reservations in asserting their political identity to enforce their own *universal politics*; sublating labour into abstract labour, exchange value and profit. However, as I argue below, capital has not had it all its own way. The power of capital and its ultimate weakness during the twentieth century, became manifest in the rise and decline of Labourism - a bureaucratic form of regulating capital and de-politicising the proletariat between 1920s-1970s. An overview of its more salient features may convince those who remain sceptical, of the *necessity* of recreating an anti-capitalist *class* identity, based on the politics of social need.

5

To understand the significance of Labourism, one must situate it within the commodity form of production. Marx opened his analysis of capital²¹ with the observation that capitalist society was characterised by the circulation of commodities and that the commodity should, therefore, become the point of departure of his investigations of the capitalist system. Marx made a number of essential, albeit complex, connections from this initial premise, which become crucial to the politics of social need. Firstly, as already mentioned, commodity society has two natures - an exchange value form and a use value, need fulfilling form. Secondly and relatedly, when the capitalist system is in ascendancy, the exchange value form will invariably dominate use value. In other words, if it is not profitable, social needs will not be met and the capacity for creative labour will remain only a potential. Marx's remarks about commodity fetishism in the opening chapter of *Capital*, capture this structural outcome and the subjective acceptance of it by the majority. Thirdly, the gold standard (as a 'universal equivalent') offered a necessary substantive basis for the dominance of exchange value, by anchoring commodity exchanges to socially necessary labour time, on pain of balance of payment problems and chronic deflation.

When Marx proclaimed that capitalism would inevitably 'dig its

own grave', he referred, fundamentally, to the decline of all three processes described above: the decline of gold, of commodity fetishism and the ability to harness social need to the whims of profitability. How does this help shed light on our understanding of the rise and fall of Labourism? The answer is that Labourism arose to arrest these three aspects of the decline of capitalism, by bureaucratically regulating social need and by administering prices and so monopoly profits. In the limited context of this paper, it must suffice to itemise the essential logic of the process. Firstly, capitalist accumulation establishes a socially integrated labour, which *facilitates collective political resistance* against capitalism (in the case of Britain, one can observe key developments in the labour movement, between 1880 and 1926; first *New Unionism*, then syndicalism). Secondly, primarily through the above institutions, resistance takes the form of a challenge to capitals 'right' to sacrifice use value and needs to exchange value and profits. Thirdly, the political threat from labour makes it increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible for capital to force labour (through deflation and stagnation), to pay for its own inability to secure world socially necessary rates of exploitation. Remaining on the gold standard was the systemic way of achieving this, however, in Britain the social pressure from reformers became to great, and the gold standard was duly sacrificed (in Britain there is an initial move away from gold – 1913-25 – which is made permanent in 1931 and in most other western societies by 1939). Fourthly, and most decisively for the emergence of labourism, capital in losing the gold standard, loses the material ground for the dominance of exchange value over use value. This meant in every day terms that targeted goods and services can be made and consumed *without direct recourse to their consequences for profit*; and, indeed, *without being valorised*. How was capitalism to manage its decline and, more importantly, in the short term, the policing of social needs? The answer, again in the short term, was Labourism.

Labourism, which, before, had remained only latent and on the political margins (the Labour Party's first real decisive election victory occurred in 1945), now moved to centre of the political stage. Labourism's political economy is based on the ability to police and dictate the terms and conditions of the *labour movement's* articulation of *their* use values and social needs. In Britain the policy of full employment; the framework of collective bargaining; and commitment to social welfare, were Labourism's fruits. The Labour Party and TUC *institutionally* represented the aspirations of Labourism. They were, indirectly, assisted significantly by the world wide affects of Stalinism. Stalinism, in *ideological* terms, created the illusion of a socialist virtue out of Labour's 'mixed economy'; while in *practical* terms, it policed working class struggles in line with the needs of Moscow (which invariably meant social democratic appeasement), through the Comintern. The post war boom was predicated on Labourism's ability to regulate social need (through the social contract) and assist profit maximisation (through state subsidies and control of the colonial markets within the 'sterling area').

The failed project of Labourism confronts us in all areas of life

today. The failure was initiated by the growing threat fully employed and confident workers represented to capitalism in the 1960 and 70s, in the face of falling profits, sinking world trade and a rapidly disintegrating Stalinist influence. Finance capital initially responded (via its control of aspects of the State, large boardrooms and money markets) with deflation, de-industrialisation and financial parasitism.²² On the back of this came the attacks on Labourist institutions, such as the Nationalised industries, public services and the industrial relations system; increasingly they had become impotent as vehicles for policing of social needs. The Thatcher years achieved most of the dismantling of the institutions of Labourism. Major's years in office have been a holding operation in Britain. In defeating Labourism, however, capital has unleashed many forces it now finds difficult to contain. Finance capital has destroyed Labourism, but it has not yet dealt with the deeper structural and systemic manifestations of its decline - the loss of a gold standard, the weakening of commodity fetishism and the systemic subordination of use value and social needs to exchange value and profitability.²³ Clearly, there has been a systematic attempt to re-commodify the economy, but it still remains at an unsatisfactory level. The State now intervenes in the economy more than ever, generating more bureaucracy than market, with the multiplication of 'internal-markets' and quangos that have characterised the 1990s.

British capitalism must complete three crucially important tasks: commodify public services to a far greater level than it has managed to thus far; control finance capital; and achieve European monetary union (a surrogate European version of a universal equivalent). If all three are achieved, then, theoretically, investment levels would increase dramatically, to sustain another boom. However, in practice it would take an immense amount of will and collective action on the part of the *European bourgeoisie* to carry through such changes. Yet the will is decidedly weak, and for good reasons. For even if all three tasks were achieved, capital has no control over society once the economy picks up and moves out of recession. Labourism and its life support system - Stalinism - are rapidly becoming *history*, and would no longer have anything like the political resonance they once enjoyed within society to be of any assistance to capital in policing social needs. The irony is only apparent in the fact that, whereas in the 1930s the post war boom was predicated on the movement off gold, in the 1990s it is predicated on the movement back on to some form of surrogate gold standard (EMU). The type of growth strategy implied is one based on a further massive devastation of public services. It is debatable, given the recent social unrest in France and the debilitating affects of unification on Germany, whether the European wide bourgeoisie will ever find the common ground needed to create a unified monetary system. Putting the matter starkly; the two social control mechanisms limiting social need to profit - commodity fetishism and Labourism - are now all but defunct. It is this weakness in 'late' capitalism, which allows openings for political activity based on the politics of social need.

6

Given the argument above, the present, *necessarily*, is one of economic slump. In the short term this is the only safe option for capital, in its attempt to harness social need to profit. Yet it is an option that adds dramatically to divisions within capital and so to the rate of its own decline. It is within this contradiction that a potential anti-capitalist political identity, based on the politics of social need, could become a powerful force for progressive change. Seemingly disparate social groups can, on the basis of negotiating social need, come together as a proletarian force capable of resisting capital and transcend present society and eventually reconstitute their unity in difference on a real basis, in a communist society. On a fundamental level, anti-capitalist movements should reject the concept of exchange fetishised by capitalism (social metabolic exchanges mediated by commodities), and embrace exchange on the basis of need fulfilling *labour activity* (social metabolic exchanges through free associate planning).²⁴ The latter would be the goal, however, there is need of a politics of transition to secure the goal. It is beyond the scope of this current paper to map such a transition in detail, nevertheless, some more obvious examples will suffice to make the point.

In the first instance it is the barrier created by exchange value and profit that inevitably draws social movements together as proletarians.²⁵ The politics of *social need* will define debates on political alliances and policies. In the past the politics of reform have created divisions. For example, Anti-road demonstrators and car workers, from the point of view of traditional disputes based on market reform are at odds with each other (to the anti-road demonstrators roads are bad *per se*, to the worker the impending loss of job and wages, become more important than curbing road development etc). From the vantage point of a politics based on social needs however, political unity can be fostered. For example, new questions which press for an answer emerge; what social needs might cars and roads fulfil? How has the quest for profit corrupted this fulfilment? How should we organise society to ensure a more adequate fulfilment?

Similarly, any strikes that do occur, should strike at the heart of capitalism, by rejecting exchange value in an obvious and forceful way. For example, a rail strike, if part of a more general and politically coordinated mobilisation of key sectors of the working class, could well be run on the basis of workers running the service for free, thus emphasising the service as a social need and de-emphasising its status as a commodity to be privately consumed through the cash nexus. A similar point can be made for all utilities currently under privatised status. Such action fosters unity and weakens sectionalism, making it harder for capital, through the media, to invoke cries of 'public disruption'. Finally, the current interest on the social democratic left in the concept of a *basic income*, has the potential to become a potent weapon in aid of progressive change. Guaranteeing every person a *basic income*, does much to break the current dependency on profit margins and balanced budgets, for self reproduction. The basic income,

could be 'index linked'; not to 'prices', but to meet differential social needs. Unity in difference would be essential in democratically defining the basic income and the level of differentials. There is no better ethos than, 'from each according to their ability to each according to their need', for deciding the scope of differential social needs. Of course capitalism could never deliver such aspirations, but then isn't this the point: the capitalist social system cannot deliver basic human needs and should therefore give way to a social formation which can.

Perhaps the most important aspect of emphasising the politics of social need, is that by doing so, we strike at the heart of capitalist accumulation, which is, after all, the basis of finance capital's centralised power. In the context of the capitalist predicament outlined above, capitalism's main source of strength is the failure of disparate social movements to overcome their differences and build a political class identity on the basis of a politics of social need.

Notes

1. D. Pepper (1993), provides an interesting appraisal of the fragmented politics of environmental groups and the cross fertilisation of interests with other movements which may arise out of this.
2. A reference to a song by the group XTC, *Roads Girdle The Globe*.
3. See *Critique*, (Journal of Soviet and socialist studies) which for more than two decades has provided a unique account of the social relations of the former Soviet Union, as well as its affects on the western and eastern working class intelligentsia.
4. In particular the emergence of an industrial relations system, which decomodified (to a degree) wages and labour power, against a backdrop of wider state regulation of the market and provision of social welfare. Stalinist Marxism views this as an evolution to 'socialism', instead of what it was, the product of the political defeat of the labour movement during the 1920s and 30s.
5. Quote taken from Paul Flewers, p21, 1996.
6. For example, see the work of the modern Marxist 'regulation school', epitomised by Michel Aglietta in France (1979), and Bob Jessop in Britain (1993).
7. As Thomas Barry (1992) notes, with reference to the Irish Green movement, although the principle carries further, "The problem is that many Irish Greens simplistically lump socialism and capitalism together as variants of the superideology 'industrialism', which they see as the real root of the ecological crisis'.
8. It is interesting in this respect that anti-road demonstrators invoke symbols and values from the pre-industrial order, for example, at Wanstead in 1993. Drawing on images of 300 year old peasant revolts against land enclosures, the demonstrators defended George Green against the road builders intent on demolishing houses and trees. See *Aufheben*, Summer 1994, No3, for a detailed account of the conflict.
9. There has been an extensive literature on this process, but perhaps the classical statement of it, although not in terms of 'modernity', was that of

