

NEW TIMES AND THE LEFT

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Few people, whatever their political persuasion, looking at the world in the 1990s, would deny that we are living in new times. But the question is how new are these New Times? Are they the dawn of a new age or only the whisper of the old one? What is 'new' about them? How do we assess their contradictory tendencies—are they progressive or regressive? These are some of the questions which the ambiguous discourse of 'New Times' poses before us. They are worth asking not because 'New Times' represent a definite set of answers to them or even have a clear way of resolving the ambiguities inherent in the ideas, but because they stimulate the Left to open a debate about how society is changing and to offer new descriptions and analysis of the social conditions it seeks to transcend and transform.

It is better to recognise that the world has changed, not just incrementally but qualitatively. The advanced capitalist societies are being increasingly characterised by diversity, differentiation and fragmentation rather than homogeneity and standardisation of economies and organisations of large scale industries which has characterised modern mass society. This is the essence of the so-called transition from 'Fordism' which defined the experience of modernity in the first two-thirds of the 20th century to 'post-Fordism'. In economic terms, the central feature of the transition is the rise of 'flexible specialization' in the place of the old assembly-line world of mass production. It is this, above all, which is orchestrating and driving the evolution of this new world. However, this must not be understood as exclusively an economic development in a narrow sense. Just as Fordism represented, not simply a form of economic organisation but a whole culture—what Gramsci in *Americanism and Fordism* called a new epoch of civilisation within advanced capitalism—so post-Fordism is also a shorthand expression for a much wider and deeper social and cultural development. Thus many of the features of this new world have been long in the making and these features might be best seen in the areas which are apparently removed from the view of what the Left has traditionally thought of as the 'point of production'. The changing position inside and outside of the paid labour force is one such area, which has over the recent years served to disrupt, if not entirely displace, the old distinction between production and consumption, production and social reproduction.

The transition, then, is epochal—not in the sense of the classic transition from feudalism to capitalism but in the sense of transition of the closing stages of the 19th century from the 'entrepreneurial' to the advanced or organised stage of capitalism which had fundamental as well as far-reaching effects. The argument here is not that we have suddenly moved from one world to another—that has never been the nature of historical changes—at which the concepts of Fordism and post-Fordism operate. Rather, it is suggested that, in the last decade or so, we have witnessed a qualitative change, which

has shifted the centre of gravity of the society and the culture markedly and decisively in a new direction. There is nothing smooth, or even comprehensive about this shift; it operates with remarkable unevenness both within and across the advanced capitalist societies. Again, it is to be taken into consideration that Fordism is still alive and well established in many places. So are the pre-Fordist forms. The point is that, despite these many lags and delays which complicate the picture and make definitive assessment difficult, post-Fordism is at the leading edge of the change, increasingly setting the tone of society and providing the dominant rhythm of cultural change.

One of the most difficult problems is to assess what stage we are at in this process—to recognise the changes and separate what is ephemeral from what is more fundamental, but at the same time not to exaggerate them. It would be quite wrong to see the world purely in post-Fordism terms, because this is certainly not the reality in USA or Japan or indeed anywhere. But the problem on the other side is more serious—refusing to recognise the changes and how they change the world in which the Left has to operate—and by far it is the more common one.

This cannot be gone into at length in the short space of an article, but it is all too common for the Left to become doctrinally fixed to that epoch and to cling to both the analysis and the organisational and programmatic forms which it gave rise to even long after its moment has passed. This is how a Left which was at the forefront of the change in one era can become stuck and transformed into a conservative political force when history moves on.

But we also have to recognise another problem—the temptation to exaggerate the new and represent it one-sidedly without taking full account of the enormous unevenness and ambiguities that characterise the process of the change. We have to focus on the new because that is what we are trying to understand. But in so doing, we have inevitably played down the old. The lines of continuity are given rather less attention than the points of rupture. Here we can only signal our recognition of this danger while defending our emphasis because of our central objective—to place the fact and novelty of the changes squarely on the agenda of the Left.

The problem is that we on the Left are not used to working in an open-ended manner. We are generally accustomed to dealing in certainties and having some clear and reassuring ideas of where we are likely to end up. The Left does not much like venturing into uncharted territory. It is filled with suspicion. And yet there is surely something odd about the Left—a political force committed to historical change and to a different future—only feeling comfortable on a well-trodden and familiar path. At all events, the modern times are characterised by no such assumptions. Nor should they be, since

they belong to an era when the Left has slowly lost touch with change and the world outside of itself and in many respects, has become a culturally conservative force.

The Left's failure to move with times has been evident for some time, but it was in the 1980s that the reality of the situation was revealed in all its drama. This was not least because the Left was faced with a new protagonist-one which it did not really understand though it always thought it did. It fought this new protagonist-modern capitalism-on old ground on old ideas and old practices, on the basis of an old analysis and an old political agenda. It was akin to deploying the cavalry against the tanks-and had much the same predictable result. The Left got splattered and dispersed. For a while it looked as if the Left had not simply lost a campaign, but that its time was up, not defeated by the enemy, but overtaken by history itself.

It is quite evident from the facts, particularly for the last two decades or more, that modern capitalism has had a much stronger sense of epochal change than the Left, both in terms of the break-up of the old post-war settlement and the creation of a more fragmented and variegated society and culture. As a result, modern capitalism has sought to appropriate that new world for itself, ideologically ('socialism is dead', 'market determines everything'), materially (giving it shape, a modern capitalist inflexion, through policy and practice) and culturally (the attempt to promulgate a new entrepreneurial culture).

It is high time to start a debate which is very much necessary not only to make sense of the new world in which we live-to appreciate the tendencies and limits of post-Fordism, to unravel the emergent post-modern culture, to understand the new identities and political subjects of society-but also to provide the parameters for a new politics of the Left, beyond modern capitalism which can give a progressive shape and inflexion to New Times. This, after all, is missing from the otherwise sophisticated current debates around post-Fordism, flexible specialisation and the even more ambiguous and treacherous reach of post modernism, namely, the question of what can be made, politically, of these New Times and for the Left.

No question could be of greater significance or urgency for the Left. Since the opening of the debate on 'New Times' number of new initiatives and policy documents have been launched by different sectors of the Left. For the most part, they represent a real attempt to engage with the new. Yet a powerful tendency is to struggle to get the surface details, without making any serious, long-ranging, or what we may describe as fundamental analysis of where society is going. But this is very much necessary to understand and without it, we may under-estimate the scale of changes and what they mean. The old visions of the Left have literally been overtaken by history. The orthodox political perspective, which for so long shaped the outlook of the left of Centre Keynesianism, lies interred in the grave of Fordism. Communism in its actual existing forms is undergoing its own crisis at the same time, and searching for a hero road, as the experience of Gorbachev and Tiananmen Square testified. Its statist and inflexible social, economic and political forms have been undermined not only in competition with the West, but by its own

species of Fordism-and obsession with quantity, the centralised plan, mass production, suppression of variety and above all the suffocating grip of centralism and authoritarianism. In whatever direction we may turn, we see that the Left faces a massive cultural crisis which demands a creative and bold engagement with the new.

For much of the 1980s, it seemed as if the main danger was that the New Right would hijack the New Times for itself. In the West it was an ascendant force-Reaganism in USA, Thatcherism in Britain, Kohlism in the then West Germany and so on. We also had a similar experience in our country but under a religious cover in the late 1980s and early 90s. But in general, at the beginning of the 1990s this now looks much less likely when a broader international view is taken into consideration.

But there is another lesser danger, that the Left in the government will produce a brand of new plans and programmes to engage with the New Times, which in practice amount to a slightly cleaned-up humanised version of that of the radical Right. Industrial policy and some other related policies of the Left-Front Government of West Bengal indicate such dangers. Such would be the inevitable consequence of two things, a pragmatic adjustment by the Left to the collapse of its various previous versions and a failure to generate its own new historic project.

Our aim is not simply to understand New Times but to generate a progressive perspective for them. Modern Capitalism, particularly its Right section, represents a profoundly reactionary settlement for New Times. While it speaks the language of choice, freedom and autonomy, modern capitalist society is increasingly characterised by inequality, division and even authoritarianism. It is also becoming clear that a Modern Capitalist conception of New Times is partial and inadequate, its guiding ideas are not just up to the task. It will not succeed in its long-term aim of hegemonising New Times for itself because they are much bigger, more profound, more epochal than the conceptions of Modern Capitalism. While a part of Capitalism has been modernising, another part has always been regressive, organised around a view which is essentially backward-looking. From the perspective of New Times, Modern Capitalism increasingly appears as a weighty and powerful anachronism.

This is not to argue that New Times are necessarily and inevitably 'good times'. Unqualified optimism is as dangerous as unrelieved pessimism. Both fail to take contradictory movements of history sufficiently into account.

New Times, after all, is still a new time for capitalism which remains in place, untranscended in all its fundamental rhythms and tendencies. Capital is still deeply entrenched-in fact more so globally than ever before. And the old inequalities associated with it remain, defining the life-experiences and limiting the hopes and aspirations of the entire groups and classes of people as well as whole communities. Alongside that, the New times are producing new social divisions, new forms of inequality and disempowerment which overlay the old ones. Is such inequality endemic to the New Times or only one possible scenario? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the potential for inequality in a more variegated and heterogenous society is greater but not less.

Another feature of New Times is the proliferation of the sites of antagonism and resistance, the appearance of new subjects, new social movements and new social identities—an enlarged sphere for operation of politics and new constituencies for change. But these are not easy to organise into any single and cohesive collective political will. The very proliferation of new sites of social antagonism makes the prospect of constructing a unified counter-hegemonic force as the agency of progressive change, harder if anything rather than easier. Moreover, due to the fact that the spread and pace of change is very uneven, the problems of political strategy required to unify old and new constituencies of change—even when this is conceptualised as a multi-faceted political project—are profoundly complex.

New Times has no necessary and inevitable political trajectory already inscribed in it. Its political future remains undecided, open-ended. Greater social inequality, an erosion rather than deepening of democratic life and culture could as well be the outcome of New Times. Only a new political project for New Times can resolve these political questions which are matters of practice as well as of analysis. But what is certain at this moment is that if the Left cannot win the struggle for New Times, more regressive and reactionary political forces certainly will win.

The emergence of New Times is marked by extraordinary unevenness. That unevenness is a global phenomenon. What is becoming evident by the day is that we are witnessing an extraordinary synchronisation of epochal change. The engine of this change may be located in the West, but its impact is global. We have so far concentrated our discussion largely on nationality, on the nation-state—yet we already know that New Times is characterised by forces which transcend and at the same time weaken, the nation-state. This has consequences for the political prospects of the European Left, since neither its own future in the nation-state of the West, nor the deep and profound problems and uneven development, backwardness and colonialism and the associated question of ethnic and racial difference, can be resolved within national boundaries. The growing globalisation of change, in markets and culture alike, is eroding the importance of national boundaries; and, by putting limits on capacity of any one government to act nationally, outside the international framework, it is changing the very terms on which the politics of the Left have so far been overwhelmingly conducted.

BUT the global character of New Times should not disguise the fact that the focus of its dynamics lies in the West. Those countries and people outside the perimeter of the West, whose whole pattern of development and forms of dependency continue to be governed and dominated by the shifts and changes generated in the West over which they have no control and of which they are not the subjects in any proper sense. New Times could easily be the signal for yet

another cycle of Western domination, economically and socially, rather than the beginning of a new kind of settlement between the over-developed and under-developed parts of the world.

The global picture of epochal change is not simply a product of the enormous process of internationalisation we have witnessed over the last decade or more. It is also a function of a parallel but separate development, the disintegration of the old communist world and a collapse in the USSR after seventy years of glorious history. The Leninist model of society which provided the Left industrialised countries and in the Third World with an alternative model of social development is historically exhausted. The problems are legion. And the outcome is uncertain. Enormous energy and creativity, exemplified by Gorbachev and the forces around him, co-existed with tendencies towards conservatism, closure, paralysis and destruction. However, the old autarchic model of socialism has disintegrated. It cannot be rescued from its old form—though its passing could be long, difficult and might be dangerous as evidenced by the events in China. The search for a way out of the crisis that now engulfs the East is underway. Some parts of the Left regard this whole episode with gloom and despair. Difficult as its evolution is likely to be from the perspective of New Times it can be regarded as a positive process, indeed, as one of the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for a renewal of the Left and thus an integral aspect of New Times.

It is impossible to make sense of New Times without taking into account all these extraordinary changes. Of course, they are not all part of 'the same thing'. They do not necessarily and inevitably all belong to the same phenomenon. But they are all occurring at the same moment, though they have different origins and histories. And, they are all reshaping the ground on which, for better or worse, the Left has to operate. Modern Capitalism would make us believe that globalisation is simply a question of markets. But in this, Modern Capitalism is itself a victim of its own narrow and narrow-minded economism. It is not a question of market but also a crisis of the nation-state and thus of national culture and identities. These are all being subtly but profoundly reworked by New Times. It is a crisis in the way in which the world is socially organised and politically divided. Beyond that, it is a crisis of the planet itself, requiring a new conception of the relationship between the human race and the planet earth. Globalisation suggests interdependence and simply competition based on narrow national and economic interests.

Let us have an honest attempt from the Left, to outline some starting points, to provide a frame of reference, for understanding the new epoch in which we are now entering though its nature is still far from being resolved and determined. New Times, in short, is about making a new world. ■