

Churchill's Socialism

Churchill's Socialism:
Political Resistance
in the Plays of Caryl Churchill

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

Churchill's Socialism: Political Resistance in the Plays of Caryl Churchill, by Siân Adiseshiah

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For Charlie and Xanthe

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INTRODUCTION

Caryl Churchill's highly respected position in the canon of contemporary dramatists is secure and well-earned. Part of her acceptance into the mainstream is due to her distinctive approach to playwrighting, distinctive because of her peculiar ability to connect with concerns of the contemporary moment and her particularly innovative manipulation of dramatic form and style. It appears too, though, that Churchill's success is less connected with her desire for a socialist society ("decentralised, non-authoritarian, communist, non-sexist—a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives"¹), and more a result of the appropriation of her work by critical approaches that prioritise gendered and postmodernist themes. This latter approach is particularly well illustrated in Sheila Rabillard's edited collection, *Caryl Churchill: Contemporary Re-presentations*.² Although there has been brief attention paid in the past to Churchill's socialist politics, the positioning of her work within the framework of socialist concerns has become a distant memory.³ This is partly due to the flourishing of feminist theory and gender studies in the 1970s and 1980s, a body of theory informing many of the theoretical approaches to her work, and also due to the dominance of poststructuralism and postmodernism in critical theory during this same period, a dominance that prioritised a focus on language, signification, and modes of representation. As part of this trajectory, Marxist, socialist, and class-based frameworks were considered increasingly to be outdated and were relegated to marginal positions within the academy.

¹ Caryl Churchill, Interview by Judith Thurman, *Ms* (May 1982): 54.

² Sheila Rabillard, ed., *Caryl Churchill: Contemporary Re-presentations* (Winnipeg: Blizzard Press, 1997).

³ See Ruby Cohn, "Modest Proposals of Modern Socialists," *Modern Drama* 25 (1982): 457-68; Christian W. Thomsen, "Three Socialist Playwrights," in *Contemporary British Drama*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 156-75; Linda Fitzsimmons, "'I won't turn back for you or anyone': Caryl Churchill's Socialist-Feminist Theatre," *Essays in Theatre* 6.1 (November 1987): 19-29; Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Rabillard's collection includes a range of perspectives on a variety of plays from *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* to *The Skriker*.⁴ In the Introduction, Rabillard describes the essays as responding to the "temporal pressure to re-examine socialist-feminist readings of Churchill's works," and as "introducing the possibility of departures (whether subtle or overt) from the prevailing emphasis upon Brechtian feminist paradigms."⁵ However, while feminist appropriations of Churchill's work have been exciting and persuasive, socialist approaches have tended to focus on ways in which Brechtian methods have been used for feminist ends. The Brechtian paradigm has often become shorthand for an engagement with a socialist framework, an engagement that does not necessarily consider notions of class, anti-capitalism, and social revolution very much at all. Rabillard's postmodern characterisation of Churchill's later work, such as *Icecream*⁶ and *The Skriker*, is offered, in part, as (a teleological) justification for a move away from "Brechtian feminist paradigms" and "socialist-feminist readings" of her earlier work.

Although Churchill's work clearly lends itself to postmodernist readings, the domination of such approaches has resulted in serious neglect of the socialist impulses that inform her work. The later plays in particular are often characterised as postmodern—as reflecting the dissolve of the totality, and depicting the incoherence of the political. But these readings overlook another narrative, a narrative that often questions, opposes, and challenges the implications of a postmodern abandonment of grand narratives and political agency. Churchill also seems to have fallen victim to the tendency to read women writers differently, to prioritise the feminism of their work, and view them apart from the supposedly more masculine politics of socialism, Marxism, and class struggle. It is therefore time for a new book on Churchill's work, one that reframes some of her most significant plays within a socialist context.

I situate Churchill's work in relation to socialist and Marxist theoretical and political thinking and activism from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. The eight plays selected are representative of an incisive intervention into anti-capitalist politics, but they also constitute a trajectory that reflects the move away from the revolutionary optimism of the late

⁴ Churchill, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1985), 181-241 (hereafter cited in text as *LS*); *The Skriker*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 3* (London: Nick Hern, 1998), 239-91 (hereafter cited in text as *Skriker*).

⁵ Rabillard, Introduction to *Caryl Churchill*, ed. Rabillard, 7-13; 8.

⁶ Churchill, *Icecream*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 3* (London: Nick Hern, 1998), 55-102.

1960s and early 1970s towards a growing pessimism arising from the seemingly relentless endurance of Thatcherism in the 1980s and early 1990s, the break-up of Eastern Europe, and the continued retreat and fragmentation of the British Left. This political and cultural context is discussed in Chapter 1 at length and in some detail, and provides a new contextual framework within which to locate Churchill's work. Much of Churchill's drama resonates with the language of the British Left, a Left that incorporates many forms, including: trade unionism, Labourism, anti-imperialist struggle, revolutionary socialism, communism, anarchism, radical environmentalism, and anti-capitalism. Writing this particular political context for Churchill inspires readings of her plays with a political inflection that is often overlooked, an inflection that provokes a more complex depiction of politics in her drama.

Chapter 2 introduces all eight plays through a consideration of the politics of utopianism. The wish for an alternative society and the desire for what is not (yet) tangible connect the diverse forms of Left opposition and reflect a reverberation thematically across Churchill's drama. The complex, but dynamic field of utopian studies facilitates exploration of the implications of the stimulating conjuncture of utopia and theatre. The suggestiveness of the theatrical space, a space of potentiality, makes it particularly apt for thinking through utopian dramatic possibility. The politics of utopia cuts across the chapter topics of Marxist and feminist historiography, the intersection of class and gender, the end-of-history thesis, and radical environmental politics. All of Churchill's plays seem to be expressive of the utopian, or on some occasions, the dystopian. The politics of utopia responds to a signification in Churchill's plays that is unaccounted for in other political fields. The traces of desire, the sense of yearning for an altogether different social context; or conversely, a critique of, or satire on, spaces that are starved of the utopian, can be found in much of her drama.

Plays that engage explicitly with Left concerns have been selected, starting with *Light Shining* and *Vinegar Tom*, which were both performed and published in 1976.⁷ They are discussed together as history plays in Chapter 3, in which the plays' dialogue with Marxist and Marxist-feminist historiography is the primary focus. The English revolution is a deeply potent, historical event for Marxists and socialists, in terms of its recuperation as class conflict: as the first national victory of the bourgeoisie and the radicalisation and mobilisation of large sections of the

⁷ Churchill, *Vinegar Tom*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1985), 129-79 (hereafter cited in text as VT).

peasantry, artisans, and day-labourers. Alongside *Light Shining*, which is a play that draws on classical Marxist material, *Vinegar Tom* poses uncomfortable questions regarding the silences in historical enquiry, both liberal and Marxist alike, over the mass slaughter of (predominantly female) “witches.”

Top Girls (written 1980-2 and performed in 1982) and *Fen* (written in 1982 and performed in 1983) are discussed in relation to the interaction of class and gender identities in Chapter 4.⁸ Anxiety over retreat from socialist, collectivist, and community-based politics that characterised the late 1970s and 1980s permeates the dramatic narrative of *Top Girls*. The play is a critical response to the outward world of privatisation and individualism, but at the same time is an inward-looking analysis of the current opposition to late capitalist society. Its particular concern is the preoccupation of contemporaneous feminism with individual success within capitalist economics, which automatically excludes large numbers of working-class women. In an interview with Laurie Stone, Churchill explained that *Top Girls* was prompted by the experience of having a right-wing woman prime minister, the idea expanding after visiting America where she “met several women who were talking about how great it was that women were getting on so well now in American corporations, that there were equal opportunities.” She accepts “that’s certainly part of feminism,” but says, “it’s not what I think is enough. I’m saying there’s no such thing as right-wing feminism.”⁹ *Fen* conveys the other side of the privatisation equation with its depiction of rural, female labour working relentlessly to increase the profits of the farmer, multinational capitalists, and city speculators. The play accentuates the feminist neglect of an anti-capitalist agenda and simultaneously exposes the dearth of anti-sexist and feminist activism within socialist and Marxist circles.

Chapter 5 considers *Serious Money* (written and performed in 1987) and *Mad Forest* (written and performed in 1990) with respect to the political moment at the end of the 1980s that connected the demise of the Soviet bloc, the celebration of monetarism, and the hegemony of the age of “post-isms” and “end-isms.”¹⁰ *Serious Money* uses the old-form of City

⁸ Churchill, *Top Girls*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 1990), 51-141 (hereafter cited in text as *TG*); Churchill, *Fen*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 1990), 143-92 (hereafter cited in text as *Fen*).

⁹ Churchill, Interview by Laurie Stone, reprinted in *File on Churchill*, ed. Linda Fitzsimmons (London: Methuen, 1989), 61.

¹⁰ Churchill, *Serious Money*, in *Caryl Churchill Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 1990), 193-309 (hereafter cited in text as *SM*); Churchill, *Mad Forest*, in *Caryl*

Comedy to satirise the world of the stock exchange in the City of London with its fast, brash depiction of a ruthless, predatory, and exploitative “community,” whose drive to accumulate profits determines the lives of billions of workers worldwide. The celebration of moneymaking prefigures the death of communism—the only perceived threat to capitalism—and thus the disintegration of any serious challenge to free-market liberal democracies, as famously heralded by Francis Fukuyama.¹¹ With its dramatisation of the Romanian revolution, *Mad Forest* is a polytonal narrative of the mass uprising and the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The dialogue that took place between the production company and students in Bucharest informs its intense sensitivity to the variety of voices included. The desire to embrace a diversity of Romanian perspectives, in conjunction with the confusion of socialists and Marxists over how to respond to these tumultuous events is echoed in the play’s political hesitation. However, although everything is up for grabs, commitment to human agency, empowerment, and solidarity is consistently played out as moments of hope and inspiration.

The sixth and final chapter analyses two plays, *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000), through a consideration of the predominance of war and an escalating deterioration of the relationship between the human and non-human natural worlds.¹² Within this decade, unremitting warfare involving Britain and Western allies as central protagonists is a dominating feature, the brutality of which is reflected in the apocalyptic sensibility of both plays. This chapter raises the question of whether the same sense of socialist commitment can be traced in plays that have been frequently labelled as postmodern articulations of political confusion. In a period where Left opposition has retreated yet further, or mutated into a less recognisable and less united force, a force exemplified by its smallness and fragmented structure, the difficulty of political theatre to maintain a commitment to socialist concerns provides the challenge this chapter addresses. *The Skriker* to some extent foregrounds incoherence as a defining feature of the contemporary moment; however, this sense of incoherence is not celebrated as a liberating postmodern development in the play but is rather lamented as stultifying, and satirised as narcissistic and politically reckless. *Far Away*, too, does more than dramatise a politically unintelligible world. Its apocalyptic vision of terror—of all-out

Churchill Plays:3 (London: Nick Hern, 1998), 103-81 (hereafter cited in text as *MF*).

¹¹ See Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

¹² Churchill, *Far Away* (London, Nick Hern, 2000) (hereafter cited in text as *FA*).

global warfare within which animals, plants, trees, and every other constituent of the natural world participates—is a frightening admonition of the implications of globalisation and environmental destruction. Again, like *The Skriker, Far Way*, whilst utilising a postmodern aesthetic, simultaneously problematises aspects of postmodernist thinking, particularly the fetishisation of language and representation at the expense of ethical commitment and political action.

CHAPTER ONE

SOCIALIST CONTEXTS

There's been a lot of talk ... about 'the times' as if they were a force of nature—we are part of them just as much as the government, the city and business interests, and our opposition can be part of them.¹

As stated in the Introduction, Churchill has expressed her desire for a non-authoritarian, communist society.² She has also famously, although hesitantly, accepted the labels of socialist and feminist playwright.³ Many of Churchill's plays engage with such subjects as struggle, oppression, power, revolution, human subjectivity and agency, and display a dynamic relationship with Left thinking, as well as an especially sensitive understanding of the nuances of dominant ideologies. Contextualising her plays' treatment of political subject matter within Left debate produces a range of political perspectives that, at times, compete against other, more postmodern, readings of Churchill's drama.

Dominant discourses in the academy on the evaluation of post-1960s historical and cultural change are remarkably hegemonic in their consensus. This consensus proposes a move away from a society characterised by Fordist mass and standardised production techniques, capital and labour conflict, and strong collective identities, towards post-Fordist, flexible specialisation production techniques, and a postmodern

¹ Churchill, Letter to the Chairman of the English Stage Company (3 November 1989), reprinted in *About Churchill: The Playwright and the Work*, by Philip Roberts (London: Faber, 2008), 115-17, 116.

² See Introduction, note 1.

³ I use the term "hesitantly" because Churchill states, "I've constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist. Constantly said it. If someone says 'a socialist playwright' or 'a feminist playwright' that can suggest to some people something rather narrow which doesn't cover as many things as you might be thinking about. I get asked if I mind being called a woman playwright or a feminist playwright, and again it depends entirely on what's going on in the mind of the person who says it." Unpublished interview by Linda Fitzsimmons, in *File on Churchill* (London: Methuen, 1989), 89.

culture identifiable precisely for its lack of stable identification. This view assumes a breakdown of traditional categories resulting in, what cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, and former editor of *Marxism Today*, Martin Jacques, describe as “diversity, differentiation and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardisation and the economies and organisations of scale which characterised modern mass society.”⁴ Churchill’s later work may well be more conducive to postmodern readings. However, deferral to a postmodernist paradigm as a self-explanatory framework for thinking about Churchill’s drama, or referencing postmodernity as a *given* historical and cultural reality, often eclipse alternative perspectives, perspectives that facilitate the expression of more of the plays’ political potential. The language of postmodernism becomes, ironically, limiting and deterministic in its assumption of a *de facto* postmodern landscape. A historical narrative that relies upon a move away from Fordism to post-Fordism, from modernism to postmodernism—like any other historical narrative—is one that privileges a particular perspective and reflects the interests of the authors of the history. Hence, an important aspect of producing a political context for Churchill’s work is to examine ways in which this historical narrative came to dominate perspectives on this period, and to explore the implications of this move for the British Left.

The Left in Retreat (1980-2000)

I do not want to suggest there was a shift of the whole of the British Left away from class politics, or that this direction coincided precisely with the re-election of the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. The discourses of the New Left were framed around the notion of disillusionment with Labour’s reformism or gradualist approach to socialism, its experience of Stalinism in the Communist Party, and its attempt to discover alternative revolutionary routes.⁵ This meant, to varying degrees, a decentring of the working class as the predominant agent of social transformation and a growing preoccupation with the ideologies of consumption and cultural practices. However, in contrast, the revolutionary Left led a “return to the class,” and considered labour and trade union politics a crucial forum within which working-class struggle

⁴ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, Introduction to *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with *Marxism Today*, 1989), 11-20, 11.

⁵ The New Left is discussed in more detail on pages 17-23.

could be mobilised.⁶ A campaign to democratise and re-claim the Labour Party, initiated in the late 1970s by the Bennite Left, Tribune, and others continued with gusto into the 1980s, gaining some successes such as the 1981 Wembley conference agreeing to set up an electoral school that required mandatory reselection of MPs amongst other democratic measures. This trajectory peaked with Tony Benn losing the deputy leadership election of the Labour Party by a whisker in 1981. Notwithstanding this Left activity, this chapter's subtitle does respond, nevertheless, to an acceleration and consolidation of a move by the New Left tradition, the Communist Party, sections of the Labour Left, feminist, and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) activists away from traditional socialist forms of organising towards more of a concentration on electoral and coalitionist approaches.

The early 1980s witnessed battles within the Communist Party between "modernisers," who tended towards Eurocommunism and used Gramscian theories of hegemony and "war of position"⁷ to validate this direction, and the "traditionalists," who wished to remain involved in more conventional forms of socialist organisation. Frequent debate took place over whether socialists should join the Labour Left, or build socialist unity outside of the Labour Party. Nevertheless, there was a realignment of sorts of the Left after Labour lost the 1983 election. This involved Tony Benn, Arthur Scargill, Militant, Socialist Workers Party and other Trotskyist organisations, as well as (to some degree) those in the Communist Party, who considered the main problem to be Labour's lack of a principled socialist backbone. In contrast, there were the contributors to the later New Times project, such as Hall and Jacques, and the Eurocommunists, who believed that part of the problem was aspects of socialist theory itself, which Thatcherism, to some extent, had exposed.

Monetarism is a dominating characteristic of Thatcherism; however, a move away from Keynesian economics was clearly pursued by Labour in the mid- to late 1970s; significantly, this occurred just after Labour was re-elected for the second time in October 1974 on one of its most Left-wing programmes. Memories of a perfidious Labour government and the Winter of Discontent of 1978/79 caused disillusionment and distrust of Labour amongst working-class voters, imbuing the seeming newness and radicalism

⁶ For example, Militant Tendency, who insisted on the centrality of Labour and trade union politics, had 1000 members by the end of 1975, 4,700 members in 1983, and over 8,000 by 1986. See John Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 204-5.

⁷ Hegemony and "war of position" are discussed in more detail on pages 22-23.

of Thatcherism with a certain attraction.⁸ Debates within the Left over the nature of Thatcherism, particularly in terms of the inter-relationships of economic, political, and social forms, dominated the period. The Left playwright, David Edgar comments on the shifting of political meanings such as that of the welfare state. Once viewed as benign paternalism, the welfare state was now “magically transformed into the promoter of irresponsibility, indiscipline and disorder.”⁹ Trade unions too, changed from being integral elements in the political economy to promoters of recklessness, disharmony, and anarchy. Transformation of the political idiom was a key element to the success of the political and economic vision of Thatcherism.

This transformation of the political idiom involved the rejection of the permissiveness of the 1960s, a return to Victorian virtues of discipline, and a transformation of a section of the working class into the “undeserving poor,” a section of the community characterised by dependence on the welfare state, a large proportion of which were single mothers. But this conservative social attitude was combined with a radical liberation of capital and the free market. The public shift towards an acceptance of the necessity for economic liberalism accompanied by social and political conservatism has been a significant dimension of the way the 1980s has been constructed. Raymond Williams attempted to equate negative forms of cultural expression, such as the seeming submission of large sections of the public to the diminution of communities, with “factors which arise from the dislocation, rather than the alternative reading, as the evidence of some essence of the people which Thatcher has in some way managed to distil.”¹⁰ But this environmental explanation offered by Williams for the rightwards shift of the British public seems not to be given particular attention or significance by many commenting on this period.

Nevertheless, there remained a sharp polarisation in the 1980s between the ideologies of Thatcherism and a socialist politics based upon an amalgamation of Left forces such as the industrial militancy of Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Greenham Common

⁸ For an account of the Labour government’s role in identifying the working class and trade unions as the constituency that must pay for the economic downturn, which in turn neatly facilitated the Tories’ designation of the trade unions as the source of the nation’s problems, see Michael Rustin, “The New Left and the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review* 121 (May-June 1980): 63-89, 64.

⁹ David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 13.

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, “Problems of the Coming Period,” *New Left Review* 140 (July-August 1983): 7-18, 11.

women, the Bennite faction of the Labour Party, Liverpool and Lambeth Councils, and Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Council (GLC). However, the Thatcher regime mounted an effective challenge to Left opposition, by, for example, breaking the 1984-85 Miners Strike, de-unionising the major media outlets at Wapping, and abolishing the GLC. This, in conjunction with the lack of, or move away from, class-based politics within certain influential sections of the Left seems to have inadvertently aided, as Edgar says, “the highly successful Thatcherite endeavour to Americanise people’s conception of the working-class.” This new conception involved the separation of “the full-time employed proletariat from the part-time or unemployed section” and the importation of “a new vocabulary—‘the inner cities,’ ‘the underclass’—to define the latter.”¹¹ An attempt, too, to re-categorise a significant section of the working class—who were increasingly finding employment outside of the industrial sector—as middle class, was to some extent successful.

The representation of a fragmented working class, aided by the end of full employment, deterioration of manufacturing, selling off of huge stocks of council housing, retracting the welfare state, and encouraging the pursuit of private property seemed to bolster sections of the Left (particularly the New Times project) in their relegation of the working class to that of a constituency status—just one constituency amongst many—as opposed to a primary oppositional force. While there was recognition by the Left that it was in the interests of Thatcherism to vehemently pursue the claim that the working class no longer existed, or was heterogeneous beyond identification, much was conceded to this way of thinking. Eric Hobsbawm claimed, “it was a crisis not of the class, but of its consciousness.”¹² Whatever it was—and certainly part of the problem with class politics was the (mis)conception that the working-class subject was a white, male, manual labourer—class as a category was no longer an automatically agreed upon, and shared, locus of analysis of change amongst some of the Left, and particularly the Left intelligentsia. Publications such as André Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class* were indicative of this retreat from social class towards new historical subjects.¹³

The break-up of Eastern Europe and the introduction of Glasnost in the USSR were also significant events in this post-Fordist narrative.¹⁴ The

¹¹ Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce*, 124.

¹² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 305.

¹³ André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1982).

¹⁴ This book is primarily concerned with placing Churchill’s plays in the context of British Left debate; hence, the idiom of this debate is retained in order to explore

Left responded to these calamitous events with excitement, hope, fear, and despair simultaneously. While the “Manifesto for New Times” praised Mikhail Gorbachev’s “honesty to admit that socialism has suffered from the arrogance of omniscience and the stagnation of bureaucracy,”¹⁵ and congratulated the creativity of Perestroika, political scientist, Fred Halliday alluded to the rise of nationalist conflict and warned of the increase in xenophobia, racism, religious conservatism, and the engendering of new right-wing organisations across most of the new states.¹⁶ Halliday lamented the capitalist restructuring of Eastern Europe and expressed regret over what he saw as the soon to be forgotten revolutionary achievements of 1917. Nonetheless, a politics seeking to work within the economic framework of capitalism and one that saw the defeat of communism as bringing with it the necessity of denouncing the revolutionary narrative initiated in 1917 became a dominating position within influential sections of the Left. Many influential Left commentators viewed the break-up of Eastern Europe as cause for reappraisal of Marxism and socialism. Mary Kaldor went as far as to question the usefulness of the word “socialism,” and asked, “is social justice an adequate substitute for the term ‘socialist’?”¹⁷ Hence, the idiom of the Left became progressively abandoned by prominent and influential Left commentators.

The fragmentation of Eastern Europe from a coherent bloc, and the reappraisal, once again, of socialism, made an important contribution to the discourse of post-Fordism. The idea that we moved into a post-Fordist era of capitalism, a period characterised by the break-up of the manufacturing industry, sudden increase of growth in the information

the extent to which Churchill’s work is illuminated through this context. However, I acknowledge Ludmilla Kostova’s discussion of the simplification and homogenisation of identities that takes place when the term “Eastern Europe” is employed, and therefore I use the term with hesitation. “Inventing Post-Wall Europe,” in *Beyond Boundaries: Textual Representations of European Identity*, ed. Andy Hollis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 83-84.

¹⁵ “The Manifesto for New Times,” in *New Times*, eds. Hall and Jacques, 448-53, 453. The contributors to “The Manifesto” were Beatrix Campbell, Marian Darke, Tricia Davis, David Green, Joanna de Groot, Ron Halverson, Steve Hart, Martin Jacques, Charlie Leadbeater, Bert Pearce, Jeff Rodrigues, Mhairi Stewart and Nina Temple, and the Manifesto was amended by the Communist Party Executive Committee.

¹⁶ Fred Halliday, “The Ends of Cold War,” *New Left Review* 180 (March/April 1990): 5-23, 11; 22.

¹⁷ Mary Kaldor, “After the Cold War,” *New Left Review* 180 (March/April 1990): 25-37, 37.

technology sector, globalisation, the increased freedom of capital, and a cultural change towards anti-authoritarianism (including in relation to trade unions and the labour movement), underpinned this embrace of a multiplicity of oppositional constituencies. Sociologist, John Urry claimed the changed economic structure did not produce homogeneity in terms of social class and pointed instead to the diversity of identities organised around “issues of gender, the environment, nuclear weapons, urban inequalities, racial discrimination, social amenities, level of rates, and so on.”¹⁸ He emphasised the fluid and decentralised nature of many of these groups and their tendency towards suspicion of centralised, hierarchical modes of organisation, including the Labour movement. There was some dissent from this position by Left cultural theorists, such as Dick Hebdige, who explained “postmodern pessimism” of the Jean Baudrillard kind as “symptomatic of the crisis of a particular intellectual formation (male, white, European) shaped in the crucible of student politics of 1968.”¹⁹ Disappointed by the failure of the revolutionary upheavals of 1968 to result in permanent change, many Leftist intellectuals, Hebdige argues, turned their talents to a more sceptical and cynical political philosophy. Nevertheless, Hebdige’s perspective is similarly framed by an emphasis on the proliferation of identities and subcultures, which, perhaps, in turn leans incautiously towards a depoliticising, postmodern relativism.

Hall responded astutely to the political nuances and ambiguities of what he considered to be “new times.” He described the contradictory nature of modernity, emphasising the simultaneous production of wealth and poverty. A newly acquired abundance of choice existed within the confines of a seemingly boundless range of consumption preferences but this emphasis on choice was symptomatic of an existence characterised increasingly by division and isolation. Globalisation was a neo-imperialist project based upon enriching the West at the expense of the poverty-stricken South. Hall described “the city–privileged scenario of the modern experience for Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin” as “–transformed into the anonymous city, the sprawling city, the inner city, the abandoned city.”²⁰ However, while tracing the increasing destructiveness of the capitalist system, Hall and the *New Times* project (particularly in comparison with the New Left of the 1960s) simultaneously no longer appeared to consider

¹⁸ John Urry, “The End of Organised Capitalism,” in *New Times*, eds. Hall and Jacques, 94–102, 99–100.

¹⁹ Dick Hebdige, “After the Masses,” in *New Times*, eds. Hall and Jacques, 76–93, 87.

²⁰ Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” in *New Times*, eds. Hall and Jacques, 116–34, 124.

revolutionary solutions. Politics became preoccupied with margins and individual subjectivities, and was susceptible to Terry Eagleton's terse appraisal of deconstruction, a practice that "like much cultural theory ... can allow one to speak darkly of subversion while leaving one's actual politics only slightly to the left of Edward Kennedy's." According to Eagleton, deconstructionists think that "the current system of power can be ceaselessly 'interrupted,' deferred or 'pushed away,' but to try to get beyond it altogether is the most credulous form of utopianism."²¹

Eagleton's comments highlight the political limitations of poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses. Cultural theorist, Fred Inglis claims, "there is something repellent in the mischievousness with which the deconstructionists toy with the loss of hope in the face of the ugliness of the times."²² At the same time, philosopher, Kate Soper saw advantages in this very recognition, a recognition that should lead to the re-alignment with principled political positions, which in turn brings with it the engagement with "more than theory."²³ Hence, from within cultural theory, there is certainly a discernible Left critique of the politically limiting implications of postmodernism;²⁴ however, on balance, it is clear that a great deal of theoretical and political ground was ceded simultaneously. Furthermore, whilst Marxist theory has been in the doghouse for the last three or four decades for grand narrativising and subsuming (and thus effectively occluding) other oppressions, such as those based upon gender and race under the category of social class, class itself has been virtually eclipsed as a category in critical theory.

The move away from class in political practice as well as in theory was coterminous with a change in political expectation, but this retreat from the aim of "changing the world" also seemed to be informed by a compromise with aspects of Thatcherite ideology. Sociologist, Michael Rustin, in his persuasive critique of the New Times project, pointed to the "unfortunate concessions to values that are probably better simply

²¹ Terry Eagleton, "In the Gaudy Supermarket," Review of *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *London Review of Books* (13 May 1999): 3-6, 6.

²² Fred Inglis, "The Figures of Dissent," *New Left Review* 215 (January/February 1996): 83-92, 91.

²³ Kate Soper, "Postmodernism, Subjectivity, Value," *New Left Review* 186 (March/April 1991) 120-28, 123.

²⁴ See also Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984): 53-92; Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

regarded as those of the other side.” Appropriating key Thatcherite principles (individualism, consumption, efficiency, and modernisation) so as to mount a more effective challenge to those very principles is what Rustin saw the *New Times* project as mistakenly undertaking. Rustin argues,

the idea of a ‘progressive restructuring of society,’ or ‘socialist modernisation,’ gives centrality to vapid notions of ‘modernity’ which in this form should have no place in socialist programme-making. It should be a question of modernisation or restructuring for what or whom.²⁵

As Rustin argues, the move of emphasis away from production towards consumption in analyses of post-Fordism masks the fundamental basis of consumption, namely that the ability to consume depends upon the earning of wages (production); therefore, the supposedly old-fashioned foci of Marxist cultural analysis (production relations, ownership of property, class relations) remain the foundations of cultural life.

Another significant section of the Left, which developed in the early 1990s, and whose departure was of a non-traditional socialist orientation was the radical environmental movement. Marxists and environmentalists have had an uneasy relationship historically, with the former viewing the primary contradiction in society as that between labour and capital, the latter identifying the contradiction as one between productive growth and the sustainability of the planet.²⁶ However, the ecologically oriented, non-violent direct action strategies used by environmental groups such as Reclaim The Streets, Earth First!, and Critical Mass, displayed, according to Graeme Chesters, “an ‘antagonistic’ or ‘intemperate’ orientation towards the normative system of production, distribution, exchange and consumption.”²⁷ In other words, unlike mainstream environmentalists such as Greenpeace, the Green Party and Friends of the Earth, the radical environmental movement was interested in the way that environmental concerns intertwine with production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Their antagonistic approach also meant a decreased negotiability of goals. Alberto Melucci explains that “antagonist movements embody goals and forms of action that are not negotiable with the existing

²⁵ Michael Rustin, “The Trouble with ‘New Times,’” in *New Times*, eds. Hall and Jacques, 303-20, 313.

²⁶ For a helpful discussion of the compatibility between Marxism and ecological approaches, see Reiner Grunmann, “The Ecological Challenge to Marxism,” *New Left Review* 187 (May/June 1991): 103-20.

²⁷ Graeme Chesters, “Resist to Exist?” *ECOS* 20.2 (1999): 19-25, 20.

arrangement of social power and with the forms of political hegemony exercised by dominant interests.”²⁸ Unlike the New Times project, which appropriated or negotiated with Thatcherite principles, radical environmentalists sought to practice a politics fundamentally different to these.

Drawing on a variety of resources such as the radical art practices of Dada and the surrealists, the revolutionary tradition of Situationism and theorists such as French neo-Marxist Henri Lefebvre and philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the diverse groups and activists that made up the radical environmental movement aimed to subvert, disturb, and reclaim, rather than lobby, negotiate, and influence the political process. Chesters explains,

reclaiming streets is not instrumental, goal oriented action aimed at convincing or cajoling public opinion to influence those in power, such as is the model for many other types of highly symbolic action, Greenpeace and the Brent Spar for example. Rather, it is a celebration of the possibility of participation in the public sphere, unmediated by institutions, it is as much about returning pleasure to politics and politics to the streets, as it is about car free space.²⁹

This amalgamation of aesthetics, celebration, and radical politics is often manifested in non-traditional forms of action, such as carnival. It is argued that the politics of street parties is traceable in the activists’ production of communal and social space, one that resists capitalist spatial hegemony. It is a form of activity that is not so much representative as productive in its creation of utopian moments in the immediate present.

Marxists responded to the eco-anarchism of the radical environmental movement with caution. The latter’s absence of a cohesive organisational structure, the lack of an overarching theory connecting struggles, the preoccupation with culture and aesthetics, and the move away from workplace activity, were some of the problems that thwarted effective collaboration between revolutionary socialists and radical environmentalists. The seemingly directionless character of the radical environmental movement and its lack of an engaged relationship with class struggle were among some of the issues that troubled Marxists. Additionally Marxists tended to suspect the utopian pre-figuration (the notion that the future can

²⁸ Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 39.

²⁹ Chesters, “Resist to Exist?” 23.

be lived out now) of the environmentalists as a form of idealism.³⁰ Not surprisingly this non-traditional method of struggle—the absence of a restrictive organisational structure, the emphasis on creativity, and the notion of “living the revolution”—is precisely what attracted environmentalists. Traditional, revolutionary socialist forms of organising, whether Leninist or not, were seen as stifling and as having the potential to reconstitute oppressive structures.³¹

The vacuum on the Left created out of the move to the right (and disintegration) of the Labour Left and the Eurocommunists, and the demise of groups, such as Militant, CND, and the Anti-Apartheid Movement were increasingly filled in the 1990s by the radical environmental movement, and in the 2000s by anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist activism. Left trade unionists and revolutionary socialists thus began to recognise the importance of engagement with these movements and made tentative connections over issues where mutual agreement existed. The Stop the War Coalition, a movement whose president is Tony Benn and whose membership includes socialists, trade unionists, peace activists and muslim groups for instance, joined thousands of anti-capitalist activists at the G20 protests in London in March 2009.

Left Construction of the Late 1960s and 1970s

Hall is instrumental in two major reassessments of the Left at two different points in the period this chapter covers. The first is the establishment of the New Left in the mid-1960s, and the second is the New Times project, which came to published fruition in 1989.³² Of 1956, when Britain invaded Suez and the USSR sent 2000 troops to suppress the Hungarian uprising, Hall stated, “it crystallised what we were saying about imperialism not being finished, and the Soviet Union being a totalitarian power. We were against both.”³³ Thereafter, Hall became a founding editor of what would be *New Left Review*. In 1967, Hall, along with Williams and Edward Thompson wrote,

³⁰ Idealism is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, page 39.

³¹ Having said that, there have been examples of productive interaction, such as the Liverpool Docks Strike of 1995-1997, where marches and demonstrations saw traditional labour movement activists, revolutionary socialists, and radical environmentalists forming what seemed to be an effective coalition.

³² Hall and Jacques, eds., *New Times*.

³³ Hall, quoted in Maya Jaggi, “Stuart Hall, Prophet at the margins,” *The Guardian* (8 July 2000).

it is our basic case, in this manifesto, that the separate campaigns in which we have all been active, and the separate issues with which we have all been concerned, run back, in their essence, to a single political system and its alternatives. We believe that the system we now oppose can only survive by a willed separation of issues, and the resulting fragmentation of consciousness. Our own first position is that all the issues—industrial and political, international and domestic, economic and cultural, humanitarian and radical—are deeply connected; that what we oppose is a political, economic, and social system; that what we work for is a different whole society.³⁴

Hall and other New Left contributors sought to develop a political movement that was anti-Stalinist, as well as anti-capitalist, and while there was already at this early stage a move away from class politics (“I had a debate with Raphael Samuel about class which we had for the rest of his life; the class system no longer explained a time of modern consumer-oriented capitalism”³⁵) there was, nevertheless, a solidity and stability of position in relation to opposing the capitalist system in its entirety, and an emphasis on the importance of the solidarity and unity of forces in order to achieve this goal. There was also a classical Marxist identification of the inextricable link between property and power and the need for those relations to be transformed.

Twenty years on, however, this promotion of unity and solidarity, and of attacking one whole system as the source of exploitative and oppressive power, had atrophied. Hall welcomed the “proliferation of new points of antagonism” and the “new social movements of resistance organised around them,” and with this, a distribution of focus to areas assumed previously to be less worthy of political attention, such as “a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body.” He identified the absence of “any overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances,” and thus concluded that “perhaps there isn’t, in that sense, one ‘power game’ at all, more a network of strategies and powers and their articulations—and thus a politics which is always positional.”³⁶ These two positions, separated by twenty years, are useful coordinates within which to explore the conditions that are the terrain of such a change in political perspective.

³⁴ Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson, “From *The May Day Manifesto*,” in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 111-43, 113-14.

³⁵ Hall, quoted in Jaggi, “Stuart Hall, Prophet at the Margins.”

³⁶ Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” 130.

Hall considered the “newness” of the New Left to result from its opposition to both capitalism and Stalinism. This is against a background of crisis in the Communist Party, which, in the aftermath of the uprising in Hungary, found its membership reduced to about two-thirds of what it had been.³⁷ While there had been a certain synonymy between Marxist theory and the political positions of the Communist Party, after the Hungarian uprising there was a proliferation of different socialist groups making claims to *the* Marxist tradition. Hence, “the Marxist Left” started to be to be talked about.³⁸ The significance of various internationalist struggles and regimes claiming Marxism as their basis was influential within the eclectic positions of the New Left. However, the New Left’s eclectic approach kept it relatively aloof from revolutionary *party* politics. The Leninist tradition of the strong, democratically centralist, vanguard party was considered stifling and anachronistic.³⁹

There was a disinclination to engage with the Trotskyist revolutionary tradition; indeed Callaghan states that “the intellectual leadership of the dissident communists,” such as Thompson, appear “never to have even considered the Trotskyist option,” and “for this reason made little headway in understanding Stalinism and the Soviet Union.” The priority for Thompson and others involved in the *New Reasoner* was to emphasise socialism’s attractions, move away from what they saw as the economically deterministic preoccupations of both Leninist and Trotskyist approaches, and engage instead with “the cultural, experiential and ideological facets of life,” which it perceived the Leninist tradition to have neglected almost completely. Callaghan describes the *New Reasoner* as heading “closer to a Gramscian Marxism,” seeing “insurrectionary Leninism as unable to meet the needs of socialists in advanced capitalist societies.”⁴⁰ Coterminous with this thinking, Hall remembers orthodox Marxism relegating culture to “a decorative addendum to the ‘hard world’ of

³⁷ Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics*, 69.

³⁸ Williams, “Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945,” *New Left Review* 100 (November 1976-January 1977): 81-94, 82.

³⁹ See V. I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978; first published in 1902); “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” in *Lenin: Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968; first published in 1905). Critics of Leninist approaches to party organisation include Ralph Miliband, who argues, “democratic centralism ... has always served as a convenient device for authoritarian party structures.” “The Future of Socialism in England,” *Socialist Register* (1977): 38-50, 50.

⁴⁰ Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics*, 71.

production and things.”⁴¹ Of course, it should be noted that Antonio Gramsci’s commitment to class struggle, his unwavering focus on capitalist economics, and his support of the Comintern right up until his death, was overlooked by Hall and others in favour of his work on culture and his theory of hegemony.

The dearth of a Marxist tradition of cultural theory and aesthetics provided the New Left with the impetus and space to develop theories and criticism in this area. The ideological uncertainty resulting from engaging with such a subject as “culture” led predictably to criticism of the political signification of some of this work.⁴² Eagleton accuses Williams’s *Culture and Society* of failing to recognise “culture” as an ideological term.⁴³ Williams’s work tended to conflate aesthetics, politics, and ethics with modes and social relations of production, and in so doing produced the precariously depoliticised and politically indistinct subject of “culture.” This over-subjectification of culture was also accompanied by a zealous resistance to “economistic Marxism.” The desire to move outside of deterministic economic frameworks was accompanied by an under-theorising of economic class relations in whatever “lived experience” was the focus of enquiry.

Another indictment of this move of the New Left towards cultural theory is one of academicism. Williams, himself, demonstrated awareness of this:

while academic theory, at its best, gives us the necessary foundations for any operative theory, it can, at its worst, be quite quickly incorporated—the unlooked-for recognition of the untouchable becoming, rather smoothly, the invitation to stay—within the fluid eclecticism now characteristic of academic institutions, until even Marxism becomes a “subject.”⁴⁴

As well as pursuing theory at the expense of practice, the academic expression of Marxism and socialism, particularly in the form of cultural studies, made it peculiarly susceptible to commoditisation. Moyra Haslett claimed that “unlike other marxist approaches, cultural studies has no accompanying political form, and its international interests, its curiosity

⁴¹ Hall, quoted in Jaggi, “Stuart Hall, Prophet at the margins.”

⁴² Williams increasingly recognised the ambiguities of the term “culture”: “the number of times I’ve wished that I had never heard of the damned word. I have become more aware of its difficulties, not less, as I have gone on.” *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1981), 154.

⁴³ Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Hogarth, 1958).

⁴⁴ Williams, “Notes on British Marxism since 1945,” 85.