



# **An Introduction to Politics, State and Society**

## **Post-Industrialism and the End of Politics?**

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## **Post-Industrialism and the End of Politics?**

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### **Key Concepts and Issues**

- Poverty and wealth in the contemporary United Kingdom
- Class, politics and social structure
- Marx and Weber on class politics
- The end of class?
- The end of politics?
- The end of history?
- New social movements
- Postmodernism and politics
- Post-industrial politics

### **Key Theorists and Writers**

- Jean Baudrillard
- Daniel Bell
- Alex Callinicos
- Francis Fukuyama
- André Gorz
- Will Hutton
- Fredric Jameson
- Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe
- Charles Murray
- Alain Touraine

- Erik O. Wright

A wealthy barrister ... was keen to play a notoriously exclusive golf course.

The Secretary refused him but as he turned to leave he spotted a vaguely familiar figure of a local peer seated in the corner.

Nervously he asked if he might play as the old boy's member. His lordship looked him up and down.

'Church?' 'C of E, Sir.'

'Education?' 'Eton and Oxford, Sir.'

'Athletics?' 'Rugby blue and rowed number four when we beat Cambridge, Sir.'

'Military?' 'Guards, Sir. Military Cross and Knight of the Bath.'

'Campaigns?' 'Dunkirk, El Alamein and Normandy, Sir. Wounded twice.'

His lordship considered long and hard, and then nodded at the Secretary.

'Very Well. Nine holes.'

(*The Dalesman*, June 1995: 49)

The humour in the above story comes from its use of reference points that are common to, and understood by, most with even a passing knowledge of the social structures of the United Kingdom. The structures of class may not be as rigid as once they were. Nevertheless, their pertinence to politics is difficult to ignore. This chapter addresses some major aspects and changes in the social structure of the contemporary United Kingdom and discusses its relevance for politics and the political.

Underlying much of the chapter are debates surrounding the continued usefulness of the concepts of class, gender and ethnicity, and their relevance in explaining the world around us in the twenty-first century. Hence, the chapter will also relate the current conflict over notions such as the 'end of class' and the 'end of history'. Further, it will also engage with some issues concerning the development of ideas surrounding postmodernism, the development of postindustrial society and the 'end of politics'.

Since the end of the Second World War, changes in the social structure have been dramatic. From the severity of life in the immediate postwar period, the UK population, and the working class in particular, soon began to experience the relative affluence of a society based on mass production and consumption. This was in part brought about by the 'long boom' and the white heat of the technological revolution of the late 1950s and the 1960s. During that time some now classical sociological writings were produced to support, and then later strongly contest, the notion of embourgeoisement, and the idea that rapidly rising living standards were transforming the masses into a new middle class.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, immigration from the West Indies and the countries of the

New Commonwealth rose, largely in an attempt to plug widening gaps in the labour market. At the same time there was an equally sensational expansion of women in the workforce. The traditional male domain of work, while still important, was chipped away. Jobs in the public sector, for example, were growing at a meteoric rate. The entire workforce structure moved away from a distinct manual towards a non-manual one.

As the previous chapters have indicated, the late 1970s brought important changes throughout the capitalist world. Widespread recession created havoc in the United Kingdom's manufacturing base and in the traditional manufacturing regions such as the north and midlands of England and Northern Ireland. Unemployment reached figures not seen since the 1930s and in many cases surpassed them. When there was eventually some glimmer of a recovery in the mid-1980s the picture which emerged was one of an economy based on service jobs, largely concentrated in the south of England, part-time female work and a male economic base which had contracted almost beyond recognition. In addition the Conservative administration from 1979 to 1997 showed little commitment to maintaining, let alone developing, the United Kingdom's traditional manufacturing base. The advancement of the welfare state was halted, with increased emphasis on the private provision of health, and the introduction of the market into welfare provision and education. Further, the cleavages that emerged along the lines of employment, income levels and the accumulation of wealth all highlighted a new culture of individualism and privatized consumption.

What has been the effect of such social change on the politics of the United Kingdom? At its most basic level, for instance, changes in class structure may well affect political alignments. Against this background, there are several key factors that this chapter seeks to further highlight, including the changing social structure and its contemporary composition; the distribution of income, poverty and wealth; and the changing structure and form of consumption and cultural change.

### **Wealth, Income and Poverty**

One key starting point for all of this is the pattern of distribution of economic resources. Issues such as unemployment, public ownership and the distribution of economic resources have traditionally represented fundamental cleavages in British politics (Heath et al, 1985, 1990). The entire area of discussion surrounding the distribution of wealth and poverty, however, remains a political battlefield. Interpretations, understandings, analyses and, indeed, definitions surrounding such issues vary dramatically and remain intensely contested.

Such debates, however, are far from academic or sterile. A major ideological pillar behind the policies of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, was the claim to bring about increased prosperity, both to individuals and to the nation. Indeed, many of those on the political Right would claim to have succeeded in widening the distribution of wealth through council house sales and wider share ownership. Those supporting these views would also suggest that the last three decades have seen a real rise in income for all social classes and perhaps a steady move towards a 'classless society'.

Likewise, for New Labour, the issue of social divisions has been central. Indeed, one way New Labour seeks to represent its contemporary political project is, on the one hand, as a critique of overt neoliberalism and, on the other hand, as an attempt to negotiate a path between *laissez-faire* and state planning. This has been reflected in the shift by New Labour towards the centre of the British political spectrum and in the development of a so-called third way in politics.

The third way, it is claimed, transcends the 'outmoded' divisions which locate politics of a Left-Right spectrum and emphasize class divisions. This understanding is central to key sections of the New Labour project, seeking as it does to appeal to a wider constituency, through 'good' government and 'social justice'. The third way creates a new mixed economy, balancing regulation with deregulation, public with private. The economy is judged in relation to wider social consequences. Government creates a stakeholding business culture through a balance of controls and incentives.

Further, the third way defines a new form of democracy based on devolved power. This democratization involves devolving some responsibility to the regions, such as in Scotland and Wales, and expanding forms of participation, such as referenda and non-orthodox forms of participation. It sets new limits to the boundaries of sovereignty and a changed constitution and a radically reformed welfare state, establishing a new set of relationships between the individual and collective responsibilities (see [Chapter 7](#)).

There has, however, been little or no evidence of any widescale commitment to economic redistribution during the New Labour administration. The main dynamic of the welfare state has been to confine and compartmentalize definitions of social problems and to direct highly focused and limited interventions through welfare administration. Certainly, this is the case in identifying target areas of disadvantage and special needs (see below). Overall, however, there is little feel so far from New Labour of an administration seeking to tackle directly the structural and economic imbalances of contemporary UK society (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Let us consider such inequality in more detail by assessing the changing patterns of wealth, poverty and disadvantage in the United Kingdom over the past two decades. Oppenheim (1994a, 1994b) provides a useful starting point with some illuminating material, focusing on arguments surrounding the measurement of poverty in the absence of any official 'poverty line'. Another key reference point is the 1993 House of Commons Social Security Committee report, itself based on figures produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) called the Low Income Families Statistics 1979–1989. Some of its major findings indicate that some 11,330,000 people (20 per cent of the population) were living in poverty (on or below income support). Further, of these, 4,350,000 people (8 per cent of the population) were living below the poverty line. In addition, another 16,520,000 (29 per cent of the population) were in or on the margins of poverty (living on up to 140 per cent of income support).

A second level of measurement is that based on the figures from the Households below Average Income. This time Oppenheim takes 50 per cent of the average income after housing costs as a relative marker for the poverty line. Again, there are important conclusions to be drawn. In the United Kingdom in 1988/89, 12 million people were living in poverty (over 20 per cent of the population). This is over double the number in 1979, when the equivalent figure was 5 million (around 9 per cent of the population).

Such broad figures are revealing, but they mask the make-up of those who experience poverty. Here, it is important to consider two distinct groupings, those who are living 'in poverty' and those who are most 'at risk' of being in poverty. [Table 6.1](#) shows the composition of the poor by economic and family status. From these figures it is clear that unemployment is a crucial determinant of poverty, as it tallies with nearly 20 per cent of those in poverty.

**Table 6.1 AVERAGE INCOME (£ PER WEEK, APRIL 1993 PRICES)**

<b>Family type</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1990/91</b>	<b>Change (%)</b>
Couple, no children	244	340	40
Single, no children	213	276	30
Couple, children	179	239	34
Pensioner couple	147	203	38
Single pensioner	140	185	32
Single children	139	153	11
<b>Person type</b>			
Male adult	202	277	37
Female adult	187	252	35
Dependent child	171	218	28
<b>Benefit status of family</b>			
Non-recipient family	195	270	39
Family on income support	111	126	13
<b>All</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>35</b>

Source: Nicholson (1994)

The risk of suffering poverty is also very different for distinct social groups. Those at highest peril are the unemployed, where around 70 per cent are in poverty. There is also a high risk for families that are supported by part-time work. Other highly vulnerable groups are single pensioners, where 40 per cent are in poverty, and single parents, where half are living in poverty. Sixty per cent of people of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin live in poverty. More than half of African-Caribbean and African people live in districts with the highest rates of unemployment (Runnymede Trust, 2000).

Other data for England and Wales shows that in 1997 people in social classes IV and V were more likely to have low birth-weight babies than those people belonging to social classes I to III. The percentage of low birth-weight babies for social classes IV and V stood at around 8.4 per cent as against 6.8 per cent for social classes I to III (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999).

It is also worthy of note that women, indicating their high perilousness in relation to poverty, dominate these groups. Research on low-income households has shown that women who normally manage household budgets develop a number of strategies in order to afford to feed their families. These include shopping frequently to keep food stocks at home at a minimum; hunting for special offers and buying convenience foods that they know their children will eat, to avoid waste. Women will also go without meals and items such as clothing in order to provide for their family (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1996). Further, as Sir Donald Acheson's inquiry into health inequalities concludes, benefit rates are too low to allow expectant mothers to purchase a healthy diet. One result is an increasing number of low-weight babies (Acheson et al., 1998).

How have the statistics of poverty altered over the past two decades? Oppenheim (1994a, 1994b) draws the following conclusions concerning the poorest 10 per cent of the population (using after-housing costs statistics). In 1989, pensioners made up a smaller proportion of this grouping, down from 31 per cent to 14 per cent. Couples with children made up a slightly

larger proportion (from 41 to 44 per cent). Most striking, however, is the rise in single people without children (from 10 per cent to 22 per cent of the bottom 10 per cent). Much of this increase can be put down to increased unemployment and the changes in benefit rates. Even more startling figures show that the poor have been falling even further behind the rest of society since 1979.

It would be strange of course, if the transformation and restructuring of the British welfare state over two decades of Conservative government had not had profound effects on the number of people in poverty. Poverty is a highly politicized concept. This is true, not only in terms of its definition and the debate over its causes, but also in terms of the overt attempts of recent administrations to redefine the policies and forms of intervention (or not) surrounding it. Government policy directly affects the rates of benefit, which in turn affects the standard of living for many in low-paid jobs. Other factors, such as unemployment rates, are also a direct consequence of policy.

Pond (1989) demonstrates that after several decades where inequality in the United Kingdom decreased, it increased noticeably during the 1980s. While increased home ownership may have slightly widened the distribution of wealth, the overall patterns remain best characterized by stability rather than any radical change.

Poverty in the contemporary United Kingdom remains widespread. Further, as Alcock (1993) and Walker and Walker (1987) highlight, there are direct links between poverty and gender, racism, ageing and disability: women, blacks, the old and the disabled suffer disproportionately from poverty. Alcock concludes that the position of the most disadvantaged groupings in contemporary Britain is a function of the majority of society, who regard poverty as a problem of, and for, the poor themselves, rather than of society as a whole. The negative and destructive effects on those living in long-term poverty has been clearly show in several studies (see Cohen et al., 1992; Seabrook, 1985).

The gap between the richest and poorest sections of society is getting wider. At the start of the 1970s the incomes of the richest 10 per cent were three times higher than the poorest 10 per cent. In the 1990s they were four times higher. The distribution of wealth has altered little in the past 20 years and is now even more unevenly shared. In 1996, 1 per cent of the population owned 20 per cent of the wealth – approximately £388 billion. Around 10 per cent of the population owned over 50 per cent of the total wealth. The wealthiest 50 per cent, however, owned 93 per cent of the wealth (*The Guardian*, 11 May 2000).

Between 1979 and 1999, the numbers living on a low income (that is below half of the average income) in the United Kingdom increased from 5 million (9 per cent of the population) to over 14 million (26 per cent of the population). This means that 7.5 million people are so poor that they cannot afford to engage in what are considered by most of the rest of the population as 'normal' social activities such as Christmas, birthdays, visiting relatives in hospital, and so on. Over two million British children go without at least two things they need: three meals a day, and toys or adequate clothing (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000). Moreover, this section of society cannot afford one or more essential household goods in their homes, such as a fridge, a telephone, or carpets for the living areas (*The Independent*, 11 September 2000).

Further, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in a report entitled *Income and Wealth* (1995), warned that the gap between rich and poor in the United Kingdom was at its widest for 50 years. They reported that income inequalities have widened further in the United Kingdom

than in almost any comparable country. The report also suggested that between 1979 and 1992, the poorest 20 to 30 per cent of the population failed to benefit from economic growth. Indeed, the poorest 10 per cent were worse off in 'actual' as well as relative terms. In the mid-1970s only 6 per cent of the population had incomes below half the national average. By 1990, however, more than one in five were in that category.

The distribution of wealth in the United Kingdom also remains vastly unsymmetrical in pattern. Up until the 1980s, wealth inequalities had narrowed rapidly. They then became fixed, with the gap much wider than for income. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) claimed that in 1989 there were 12 million people living in poverty. Further, Britain showed the sharpest rise in poverty in any country in the EC between 1980 and 1985 (*The Observer*, 23 November 1994).

More people are now living in poverty than at any other time in the past 20 years. Of the 56 million Britons, about 15 million or 26 per cent of the population live without what many would regard as the basic necessities of life (*The Scotsman*, 11 May 2000). There is still more evidence. In late 1998, Sir Donald Acheson, a former government chief medical officer, warned of a growing gap between rich and poor, claiming that it was now impossible for many poor families to buy a nutritious diet.

It has also been reported (*The Independent*, 15 October 1998) that during the past 20 years the difference in life expectancy between those at the top and the bottom of the social structure has widened. Death rates throughout that time have fallen by 40 per cent among social classes I and II, by 30 per cent among classes III and IV. In the lowest class category, however, the equivalent figure is only 10 per cent. Beyond this, men in social classes I and II live an average of five years longer than those in classes IV and V, while women live, on average, three years longer. The poor also suffer illness disproportionately. One in five professional men aged 45–64 has longstanding illness, compared with half of unskilled men. The gap between the rich and poor continued to grow throughout the 1990s (*The Guardian*, 11 May 2000). The *Office of National Statistics Report* (2000) confirmed that during the 1990s the rate of growth of incomes of the top 10 per cent continued to outstrip improvements at the bottom.

The gendered pay gap is also apparent from the *ONS Report*. The average earnings of men in full-time work are around 42 per cent higher than the average earnings of women. Between 1961 and 1998 the proportion of households headed by a lone parent rose from 2 per cent to 7 per cent. A quarter of all black families is made up of a lone parent with dependent children.

There are distinctly identifiable geographical aspects to these patterns of deprivation. Some of the areas of 'worst health' include parts of Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Salford, Tyne Bridge, Southwark North and Bermondsey. In contrast, the areas of 'best health' can be found mainly in southern England, East Anglia and the West Country.

Despite what the New Labour government would have us believe, however, the poor are not necessarily concentrated in identifiable geographical pockets of deprivation. As Denny (2000) points out, in 1997, two-thirds of all unemployed people lived outside the 44 most deprived districts, as identified by the Social Exclusion Unit. Nor is there any crude north-south divide in evidence.

The consequences for the one million people dwelling in one of the 'worst health' areas in the United Kingdom are dramatic. In 1991 they were 2.8 times more likely to report suffering from a long-term, limiting illness than were those in areas of 'best health'. People living in the



'worst health' constituencies were 2.6 times more likely to die prematurely than those living in the 'best health' localities (Shaw et al., 1999).

The growing prominence of the poor has set in motion a fierce political debate. Following on from arguments in the USA, there is now controversy as to whether sections of the United Kingdom's inner-city communities have reached the point where it is possible to describe them as an underclass, that is a stratum in society comprising the long-term unemployed, those who have never worked and those who are fully dependent on social security and state provision for their living standards. The underclass is that section of the working class that has most directly experienced the spread of unemployment and job insecurity, the move away from traditional, male, full-time employment towards part-time, largely female work. They have also experienced the continuing gap between state benefits and average earnings.

### Notions of the Underclass

Underlying much of the discussion regarding Britain's new poor is the ideological positioning around whether they are victims of broader structural features of society or merely feckless and workshy individuals who have excluded themselves from the mainstream economy. Further, if an underclass exists within the United Kingdom, will it have the desolating effect on British society that it seemingly has done in many cities and regions in the USA?

The origins of the contemporary usage of the term 'underclass' lie in the USA. Here, it was used to describe a group of people entirely reliant on state handouts, or the proceeds of illegal or informal work. Their social position was marked by an extremely low degree of mobility out of this group into any another. It was argued that disadvantage was generational in that one generation's poverty was passed on to the next. Hence, disadvantage becomes almost pathological. Wilson (1987) argues that an underclass composed of those below the stable employed working class has come into existence in the USA.

The notion of an underclass and the parameters of much of the contemporary debate on both sides of the Atlantic has, since the publication of his controversial bestseller, *Losing Ground* (1984), been dominated the writings of Charles Murray. It was in a series of feature articles published in *The Sunday Times* that Murray (1989) first expanded his views regarding a United Kingdom underclass. He predicted that, within a decade, Britain's underclass would become proportionately as large as that of the United States.

In a more recent work, Murray (1994a, 1994b) examines Britain's social problems and claims to identify the emergence of a British underclass, defined not only by its poverty but also by its behaviour. He concentrates on three 'signals' of the rising underclass: rising levels of violent crime; economic inactivity among working-aged men; and 'illegitimacy', the number of children born outside marriage. He provides 'evidence' to support his thesis. Between 1987 and 1992 property crime in England and Wales increased by 42 per cent. By 1992 the risk of being burgled in England and Wales was more than double that in the USA. The violent crime rate increased by 40 per cent, so that the rate in England and Wales in 1992 was the same as in the USA in 1985. In 1987, some 23 per cent of births in England and Wales occurred outside marriage. By 1992 this figure had risen to 31 per cent.

Murray uses this material to defend his claim that the welfare state has had unintended and perverse effects, actually making matters worse, at least for its supposed beneficiaries. Indeed, in his more recent writings (*Sunday Times*, 13 January 2000) he widens his focus and calls for a return to the liberal ideals of limited government, local autonomy and control over

one's own destiny.

The works of Murray have certainly not gone unchallenged. From various perspectives, Brown (1996), Deakin (1996), Mann (1994) and Walker and Walker (1996) all reject the usefulness of Murray's notion of underclass. Field (1989) suggests the term is only of some use if the notion is constructed with precision. While clearly identifiable differences between the 'new poor' and the traditional working class have led some to classify the former as an underclass (Dahrendorf, 1982), Field has pointed out that the underclass and the poor are not synonymous.

What distinguishes the underclass from others on low income is that they are cut off and isolated from mainstream society, drawn, for example, from the long-term unemployed, single parents and very old pensioners. Field highlights four major reasons for the construction of what he terms the contemporary underclass. First, the nature of social mobility. For many years 'bright' working-class children rose to well-paid middle-class jobs. To some extent Murray recognizes that this trend continues. What is new is that the contemporary social structure forces those who previously held respectable working-class jobs into the underclass. Secondly, throughout the 1980s and 1990s income and wealth was pushed towards those at the top. Thirdly, throughout the same period, an ever-widening gap in living standards was an 'official objective' of Conservative governments, abandoning any commitment to paternalistic Conservatism. Finally, he points to a major shift in public attitudes. This has led to the psychological and political separation of the poorest sections of society. Importantly, the concept of solidarity within the working class has been undermined.

The term 'underclass' is also be used in a way to blame the poor for the position they occupy (Walker and Walker, 1996). At its extreme it suggests that the situational disadvantage of such people makes them unemployable. Reflecting the earlier notions of Lewis (1961), it is argued that these individuals create a culture of deprivation which, when transmitted to their children, forms part of a 'cycle of deprivation'. For Murray, this has produced a culture which erodes any distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Throughout his recent writings, he is particularly keen to apply the above to black youth in America and to explain the withdrawal of black youth from the voluntary labour market.

Murray (1984) has also argued that in the USA several important social changes occurred during the 1960s. In particular, the idea that a man should be the family 'breadwinner' and cater for his wife and children was directly undermined. For Murray, this was largely because explanations and understandings of the situation shifted away from an emphasis on individual characteristics and behaviour and towards structural factors such as poverty and unemployment. One result, it is argued, is that notions of 'self-sufficiency' and individual responsibility were undermined, eroding the moral obligations of healthy adults. This in turn helped remove any 'stigma' of receiving public assistance and welfare, making this section of the population more and more willing to live off the welfare provision of the state and further increasing dependency.

### **Politics and the Underclass**

For Murray (1990: 2), perhaps the only major difference between the USA and the United Kingdom is that the 'United States reached the future first'. Within the United Kingdom such ideas have been readily adopted and applied by several neoconservatives. Mount (cited in Loney, 1987: 11), for example, makes his distaste for the poor overt when he claimed that the rich 'admire the poor less and less, partly because the poor are not as poor as they used to

be, but also because the poor fritter their money on such trash – video cassettes and cars with fluffy mice that joggle in the back window’.

Marsland (1994: 14–17) is another who makes his position clear on such issues. He believes that the state provision of welfare has ‘inexorably corrupted the whole nation’. It is simply not needed because of the rising living standards of the whole population, because it cannot be afforded and simply does not work. More specifically, the underclass or, as he would term them, those minority who are temporarily incapable of self-reliance, are in the position they occupy because of their own failings.

From such perspectives, the welfare state has thus only succeeded in creating dependency and ‘sustaining a self-excluding underclass’. Marsland’s (1994: 16) thoughts on the homeless are typical: in his view a large proportion are ‘mentally ill and handicapped people who were much better and more economically served in asylums. Others are young people who left home inappropriately and unnecessarily in the expectation that the state will provide what their own prudence has not.’ This viewpoint is representative of that ideology which seeks to extend its account to link widescale unemployment, family break-down, increasing crime rate and other social problems directly to the construction of a culture of dependency and the concept of the underclass.

The idea of an underclass whose composition is determined by genetic or cyclical inferiority has not gone without criticism. As Bagguley and Mann (1992) point out, the term ‘underclass’ has increasingly been used to blame victims for their own deprivation. Part of this, for Bagguley and Mann, takes the form of a classic moral panic around the notions of illegitimacy, violent crime and fecklessness, hence the construction of the distinct image of members of the underclass as ‘idle thieving bastards’. They further argue that this constructed myth is best understood as an instrument of ruling-class ideology, obscuring the core processes that perpetuate social inequalities.

Further, as McNicol (1987) highlights, the concept of an underclass as a sub-stratum group that falls outside an otherwise cohesive and integrated society has a remarkably longstanding and tenacious history. Despite much recent widespread attention, the concept remains hazy, involving biological arguments and moral judgements as well as arguments about the effects of a changing class structure, inadequate socialization and a continued deviant sub-culture.

What holds the definitions together is a political desire to criticize certain groups in society as failing and a burden on the ‘successful’. As Morris (1994) demonstrates, Murray’s arguments have become central in setting the context of the underclass debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Hence, in the United Kingdom the spotlight has in particular been directed towards high rates of illegitimacy among ‘never-married mothers’ and high dependency among the unskilled manual working class.

### **The ‘30–30–40’ Society**

With much of the above in mind, Hutton (1995b) categorizes the United Kingdom as a ‘30–30–40 society’. His model is based on recent social fissures of the working population. Here, he defines the underclass in slightly different terms. The first 30 per cent, he calls *the disadvantaged*. Central to this grouping are the four million who are out of work and unemployed, including unemployed women and those women who cannot work because the loss of their husband’s income support would not make this financially viable.

The second 30 per cent are made up of the *marginalized* and *the insecure*. Those in this category are defined not so much by income but by their relation to the labour market. Working as they do in insecure working conditions, they are marginal to the mainstream. There are more than five million people in the contemporary United Kingdom, working part-time, of whom around 80 per cent are women. There are others, those with full-time but insecure employment. Their position in the labour market is unprotected. They are increasingly under threat, through the growth of casual employment and short- and fixed-term contracts at work.

Finally, there is that 40 per cent which comprises *the privileged*. The market power and strength of this segment has increased since 1979. It is made up of several important groups – those full-time employees and the self-employed who have held their jobs for over two years, and those part-timers that have held their position for over five years. The 31 per cent of the workforce who remain members of trade unions and have a high degree of workplace representation usually fall within this category.

According to Hutton, the above break-down of the labour market is restructuring Britain for the worse, creating ‘a new and ugly shape of British society’. This draws him to some startling conclusions. As he puts it:

The fact that more than half the people in Britain who are eligible to work are living either in poverty incomes or are in insecure work has had dreadful effects on the wider society. Britain has the highest divorce rate and the most deregulated labour markets in Europe and these two facts are closely related. The impact of inequality is pervasive, affecting everything from the vitality of the housing market to the growth of social security spending. (Hutton, 1995b)

### **Class, Politics and Social Structure**

So how can the social structure of the contemporary United Kingdom best be understood? In considering theories of social class in social theory we enter a debate where clashing interpretations, models and schemes seem to have no end. What all of these have in common is the attempt to make sense of the social world. After all, what are termed ‘class’, ‘class relations’, ‘class conflict’ and so on are products of humans attempting to order the chaotic manifestations of the world around them. First of all, therefore, it is useful to consider some general issues such as how to classify objects in the social historical world.

The world is, in part at least, constructed by our social practices, by our narratives, our stories, myths and language, by our social understanding, and our social theories, formalized or otherwise. In this sense, we have to consider ‘social class’ as a rhetorical term. Existing groups redefine themselves, perceive themselves in new ways, present new faces to the outside world, divide and fuse and are formed out of a practice of struggle where definitions and identities are constituted by a complex web of representation and characterizations. Clearly, however, the definition of class is not just subjective, but also reflects ‘real’ changes in an existing social structure.

This immediately draws us to other questions, such as how such groups form, and what holds them together? Obviously, homogeneity is not a necessary and sufficient condition for cohesion. A group that manages itself together in its existence, and establishes formal representative institutions, constitutes, in some respects at least, an objective entity.

Any subsequent discussion of this, however, depends on how class is defined. That there is no agreed theoretical position on how class is defined is a breathtaking act of understatement. It is, however, possible to identify two broad approaches, deriving from the works of Marx and Weber. Let us begin, therefore, by considering in rather more detail these two major perspectives, drawing as they do on class in different ways as a core organizing principle of society.

### Contemporary Marxism and Class

Although Marx is inevitably seen as the most detailed theorist of class, it is now a well-documented paradox that he never made a consistent statement on the matter (see Wright, 1985). There is, however, plenty in Marx's writings to indicate strongly the direction of his thinking. At a general level of Marxist analysis, class in capitalist society can be defined as follows: in any capitalist society the class of wage earners has nothing to sell but its labour power. This it sells to a class of employers, which owns all capital assets and resources.

This is the relational theory of class with which most are familiar, that places two basic classes in a dichotomous relation of antagonism or struggle. It is important, however, not to think that Marx's major works form some seamless web on the issues of class. Indeed, it is in his more journalistic writings, such as *The Class Struggle in France* [1895] 1969), where Marx identifies a more complex model of class, which has been adapted by several more recent Marxist writers.

One understanding of contemporary class structure derived from Marxist writings can be found in the work of Wright (1978), who has argued that while class remains central, it is necessary to introduce the further concept of 'domination'. Previously, ownership of property meant control over investment, physical capital, such as plant, and control of labour. In modern economies, however, legal ownership is often separated from investment and production and from direct control of the labour process. Ownership of companies ranges across individuals and institutional shareholders. The 'top' management retains control of the use of assets, but the control of day-to-day production is delegated to junior managers, who in turn delegate control of the workforce to supervisors.

For Wright, all of this means that many people find themselves in contradictory class positions: managers control without ownership; the petty bourgeoisie may own, but not actually employ labour; many craft workers have control over the labour process, but they of course remain employees. Wright also believes that the petty bourgeoisie are 'outside' the capitalist mode of production, although they clearly exist as an identifiable grouping within capitalist societies.

Wright's work has led to criticisms and has resulted in another fundamental reassessment by Roemer (1982) of Marxist class theory. He believes that by emphasizing aspects of control, Wright had made a misjudgement, particularly as this separated domination from exploitation. His is a complex argument surrounding the rejection of control of the labour process and the appropriation of surplus value.

Further, Roemer argues that it is necessary to generalize Marx's notion of exploitation to make it applicable to socialist, feudal and capitalist societies. He seeks to show that different forms of exploitation are characteristic of different types of society. Roemer's fundamental argument is that property relations are the key to exploitation, not social relations at the point of production, and that 'democratic control' of the surplus, not of the workplace, is the real

necessity for social transformation. Roemer attempts to escape from talking only about capitalism. He wanted to abstract from actually existing capitalism as much as possible, to construct a general theory that could be used to discuss exploitation under socialism as well.

In response to Roemer's largely theoretical approach, however, Wright (1985) revised much of his work on contradictory class locations, formulating a scheme of modes of production (see [Table 6.2](#)). For Wright, there is no inevitable movement towards socialism and communism, but rather struggle between exploiters and exploited. For him, all the previous major transitions, from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to state socialism, have been marked by the previous contradictory class becoming dominant. For example, in the French Revolution it was the bourgeoisie who were central in restraining the power of the monarchy and aristocracy. Likewise, in the Russian Revolution, power was centralized with state functionaries who controlled production and labour.

**Table 6.2 ASSETS, EXPLOITATION AND CLASSES**

Type of class structure	Principal asset unequally distributed	Mechanism of exploitation	Classes	Principal contradictory location
Feudalism	Labour power	Coercive extraction of surplus labour	Lords and serfs	Bourgeoisie
Capitalism	Means of production	Market exchanges of labour power and commodities	Capitalists and workers	Managers/bureaucrats
Statism	Organization	Planned appropriation and distribution of surplus based on hierarchy	Managers/bureaucrats and non-management	Intelligentsia/experts
Socialism	Skills	Negotiated redistribution of surplus from workers to experts	Experts and workers	

Source: Wright (1985)

What both Roemer and Wright are seeking to do is to demonstrate, while remaining within the essential framework of Marxism, that there are multiple strands of exploitation within contemporary capitalist society. Others have sought to reformulate Weber's classical view on social classes. The relationship between the two perspectives is not necessarily a directly oppositional one. It is useful to remember that, although essentially conservative in his politics, Weber's writings reflect not only a clear opposition to the emerging socialist movements in Europe at the time, but also a healthy intellectual respect for Marx's theoretical position.

### Weber and Class

The starting point for many subsequent criticisms of Marx's concept of class can be found in Weber's 'Class, Status and Party' in his massive volume *Economy and Society* (1978). In particular, the interpretation, which argues that Marx treated 'class' as a purely economic phenomenon and, moreover, regarded class conflict as in some way the inevitable outcome of clashes of material interest, has been central to many Weberian and neo-Weberian arguments.

Such critics point out that the divisions of economic interest which create classes do not necessarily correspond to sentiments of collective identity which constitute differential 'status'. Thus status which depends upon subjective evaluation is a separate dimension of stratification. It differs from class, and the two may vary independently. There is yet a third dimension, so the argument continues, which Weber recognized as another independently variable factor in stratification, that of power.

Another dimension of Weber's work on class, which has been identified by Giddens (1994), is that Weber's viewpoint 'strongly emphasises a pluralistic conception of classes'. For example, the class position of the property-less is differentiated in relation both to the types and degree of 'monopolization' of 'marketable' skills that they possess. Most importantly, there are various types of middle class which stand between the 'positively privileged' classes (the propertied capital asset owners) and the 'negatively privileged' classes (those who possess neither property nor marketable skills).

Clearly this is a more complex cartography of class than the orthodox interpretation of Marx would suggest. A Weberian reading of class points to the working class 'segmented' into several different categories. For those coming from a Weberian perspective, class is best understood in terms of social status and skills. Within these, occupation is the key determinant of class. Different jobs can be ranked in a hierarchical order of status as the key indicator.

Although in Marx's terms these groups are separated from the ownership of the means of production, they cannot be said to occupy the same location as the traditional working class. While, on the one hand, there are strong arguments supporting the view that Marx's and Weber's concept of class are not contradictory in their essence, there are, on the other hand, counter-perspectives, especially from more orthodox Marxists, that these views of class differ fundamentally. Certainly this is correct, in respect that Marx sees privileges originating in the sphere of production relations, while Weber concentrates on relations of distribution and circulation.

### **Contemporary Marxist and Weberian Models: Towards Convergence?**

One of the main challenges offered by neo-Weberians to the Marxist analysis is that Marxism cannot account for the increasingly fragmented class relations in contemporary society. Weberians are also highly critical of the idea of an aggregated consciousness originating from workplace relationships which will lead to collective action. A refutation of such Marxist tenets can classically be found in the works of Lockwood (1958, 1966). In classical Weberian vane, he emphasizes that consciousness has many sources, some of which generate individualized and privatized consciousness which may actually move against collective identity and action by working people.

Dahrendorf (1959, 1982) is another who has produced a clear neo-Weberian critique. For him, the Marxist analysis is increasingly outmoded and outdated, and simply cannot account for

the complexity of contemporary class relations. In the case of the bourgeoisie, this has involved a clear separation of ownership of capital (which is increasingly in the hands of shareholders) from the control of capital (which is ever more in the hands of managers). The proletariat, far from becoming more homogeneous, has become increasingly fragmented, especially as technological advances have widened social divisions and cleavages rather than solidified them.

The issues outlined above have led some to pursue a synthesis of the views of Marx and Weber to produce a partly converged model. Later neo-Marxist writings have stressed the different fractions within classes and, in partly seeking to accommodate the Weberian model, have thus suggested that conflict is possible within classes as well as between them.

One continued difference between the two approaches is that most neo-Marxists still advocate the centrality of class struggle as a transforming force in society. There are, however, increasingly apparent overlaps between the two understandings of class. Bradley (1992: 15) summarizes the main points of comparison and contrast of both Marxist and Weberian perspectives (see [Table 6.3](#)). Despite this, there are many that believe that class is no longer a focal point in the understanding and organization of society. One crucial question in the development of contemporary politics, therefore, is what pertinence, if any, do notions of class have for the lives of ordinary people?

**Table 6.3 NEO-MARXIST AND NEO-WEBERIAN POSITIONS ON CLASS**

Neo-Marxist	Neo-Weberian
Class divisions generated by relations of production, especially by the mechanism of exploitation	Class divisions generated by the operation of the market
Unifying effect of exploitation emphasized	Classes are seen as subject to growing processes of fragmentation
The existence of 'fractions' and conflicts within classes acknowledged but seen as less important than the conflicts between classes	Divisions and conflicts within classes seen as just as significant as conflicts between classes
Middle classes seen as linked to one of the two major classes or as 'structurally ambiguous'	Middle classes seen as an autonomous grouping and considered as socially significant as the propertied or working class
Consciousness arises from relations of production	Consciousness has many different sources
Dominant ideology accounts for the failure of the working class to develop a critical class consciousness	Fragmentation, social mobility and growth of democratic political structures inhibit the growth of class consciousness
Revolutionary potential of the working class remains	Class revolution is improbable

Source: Bradley (1992:15)

### The End of Class?

It is now a common proposition that social class is no longer as important as it was (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Compton, 1996). At its extreme, it is claimed that 'class is dead'. Much of this



proposition rests on the view that the definition and classification of class has become increasingly complex and elaborate, to the point where it has become so nebulous as to be meaningless. Those who strongly support the 'decline of class thesis' even go beyond this, to suggest that class is no longer a vital determinant of social and political identity. People, it is claimed, simply do not identify with a particular class in the way that they once did, nor can class be seen as the key determinant in life chances and experiences.

Much of what we have encountered so far, including debates about 'a classless Britain', the 'end of ideology', the 'end of history' and the widespread popular usage of terms such as 'postmodernism' and 'postfeminism', have led some to hail a new epoch for politics within the United Kingdom. Central here is the notion that society is moving beyond the 'old' social divisions, based on class, gender and ethnicity, to a new form of post-class politics, based on differing identities around, for example, sexual orientation or the environment (see Evans, 1993, 1999). Fundamental to all of this is the emergence of the new politics that finds expression through the new social movements, such as those identified later in the chapter.

Miliband (1991: 19), for example, notes that 'an extraordinary degree of confusion and obfuscation attends the discussion of class in relation to capitalist societies'. While he recognizes the growing importance of the new social movements, such as feminism, anti-racism and sexual liberation, he still believes that primacy must be given to the labour movement, which remains 'by far the most important movement in any transformation (of society)' (1991: 96).

While, for some, Miliband's perspective is extremely restricted, for others the death of class has been wildly exaggerated. The concept is still seen to be of direct and continuing relevance. Compton, for example, argues that capitalist industrial societies

are still stratified, and theories of social class still provide us with essential insights into the manner in which established inequalities in wealth and power associated with production and markets, access to educational and organisational resources, and so on have systematically served to perpetuate these inequalities over time. (Compton, 1993: 206)

Further, as Marshall et al. (1988: 11) suggest, although parts of the decline of class thesis may have some validity, there is no obvious lack of class awareness among the population of modern Britain as a whole, which 'remains a capitalist class society, and the various attempts to identify 'post-industrial' (and post-capitalist) features in the developments of recent years are not at all convincing'.

Debates around the reformulation of class therefore remain central to interpretations and understandings of politics. Crucial here are arguments concerning the extent to which the major organizational categories of society outlined in much of this book, namely, class, gender, ethnicity and race, have been broken down or fragmented to the point where they no longer retain the organizational strength they once did. Indeed, for some, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to speak of group and political identities based on these classifications. One source for such thinking was the emergence of an analysis from a section of the British Left in the latter part of the 1980s.

### **New Times for Class**

Around the late 1980s there was another attempt from the Left to redefine politics and the

political. This involved many of those seeking to understand contemporary politics through a series of theoretical positions: post-Fordism; postmodernism; globalization; and the politics of identity and citizenship. The focus for much of this was the magazine *Marxism Today*, and it was given momentum by the Communist Party, which quickly adopted the *Manifesto for New Times* as a central tenet of its policy. It is useful to identify the starting point for the *New Times* analysis. From this perspective (*New Times*, 1989: 17), a core feature of contemporary society is 'the proliferation of the sites of antagonism and resistance, and the appearance of new subjects, new social movements, new collective identities – an enlarged sphere for the operation of politics, and new constituencies of change'.

It was recognized that these are not easy to organize into any collective political will and that there is no 'inevitable political trajectory' to society. Hence, *New Times* suggests both the break-down of class narratives and the traditional opposition of Left and Right. The new image, it suggests, is one of fluid identities, whereby, for example, a woman can be a lesbian, a mother, an ecological consumer, a political activist, a community leader, a voter, and so on.

This series of identities is meaningful in a way that simply being 'working class', or seeking to organize as working class, was not. This takes us to another hugely important current perspective regarding the nature and vigour of contemporary politics – the idea that other forms of social movements mobilize and drive politics. The expansion of the definition of politics beyond the party political, the diminished role of the state, the ever-increasing importance of globalization and social fragmentation mean that the centrality of class can no longer be sustained.

### **New Social Movements**

If class is no longer a central organizing force in society, what does provide the political dynamic in contemporary society? One explanation lies in the growing prominence of 'new social movements' and the differing patterns of radicalism and political values expressed through such groupings (Diani, 1992; Laraña et al., 1994; Melucci, 1980).

A useful starting point to understand the development of such groupings is found in events in the USA in the late 1960s and 1970s. This period saw the emergence of a wide variety of movements, such as those agitating for civil rights, black power and the politicized sexuality of the women and the gay liberation movements. Most of all, however, it manifested itself in the students' movement. In part such movements were a direct response to specific events, particularly the USA's involvement in the Vietnam War.

At times, issues of concern to the student and anti-war movements overlapped with other developing 'separatist' movements, such as the black civil rights movement and the women's and gay liberation movements. Importantly, all these movements developed and were organized outside the existing class-based political structures of the Left.

The structures of new social movements are complex and often involve unplanned, spontaneous actions. The tactics of new social movements may include sit-ins, demonstrations, and perhaps even collective expressions of violence such as rioting. They may also include, however, meetings, fund-raising, lobbying or petition campaigning (see Lofland, 1985; Marwell and Oliver, 1984). New social movements may be characterized as anti-statist, promoting more informal and non-hierarchical forms of participation and organization.

So how is it possible to understand the significance of this transformation from the 'old politics' to the 'new'. Here, Inglehart (1977a, 1977b, 1980, 1981, 1987) provides a useful starting point in identifying what he terms as a 'silent revolution'. This involves the shift from the old politics of materialism towards the new of post-materialism. He suggests that the focus of politics has now radically altered, from a concern with material issues and economic resources towards post-material values and quality-of-life issues. The central issues within old politics were economic growth and distribution, military and social security and social control. At its core were the values of freedom and security of private consumption and material progress. Old politics dominated from the end of the Second World War until around the early 1970s. During this time, there was a sharp separation between those organizations representing societal interests and the political parties concerned with winning votes and office. Collective bargaining and representative government was regarded as the exclusive legitimate mechanisms for resolving political and social conflict. Post-materialist values tend to emphasize senses of belonging, self-expression and issues surrounding the quality of life. Examples include the environment, human rights, peace, personal autonomy and identity. These are forms of politics that can be regarded as neither public nor private. It is a politics that is perceived as having little to do with the class relationships that used to dominate politics.

So how is it possible to understand the roles of new social movements? Such movements often seek to politicize civil society in ways that are not constrained by existing political structures, institutions and political parties. Further, new social movements usually contain several identifiable features, including mass mobilization (at least occasionally), a tendency towards loose organizational structure, spasmodic activity, working (in the past at least) outside established instructional framework, and central aims which are either about bringing social change or preserving the existing social order.

It is possible to argue that the momentum for the growth of new social movements is provided by the development of post-industrial society. Here, crucially, class is displaced as the central location of conflict in society. It is patterns of consumption, rather than of production, which provide the key to unlocking this new society. As Touraine (1971: 9) puts it, the cleavage is now between the 'structures of economic and political decision-making and those who are reduced to dependent participation'. Given this, the workers' movement can no longer be seen as the central social movement in society.

Touraine (1981, 1983) further distinguishes two types of society, the industrial versus post-industrial, with two corresponding forms of social movement. Workers' movements are characteristic of social movements in industrial societies, whereas new social movements are characteristic of post-industrial societies. The aim of post-industrial social movements is not directly to seize power or integrate directly into the political decision-making process. Rather, they seek to represent those non-class-based interests centred around gender, peace, race, ethnicity, ecology, sexuality and so on (see Carter, 1992; Cohen and Rai, 2000; Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Pakulski, 1990; Yearly, 1992; Young, 1990). In the past decade one of the major locations of the new social movements has involved the environmental movement and the emergence of 'eco-warriors' involved in direct action. In particular, this has manifested itself in protests against airport expansion and road-building programmes (see McKay, 1998).

As Doherty (2001) points out, these anti-road protests differed from what had gone before in three crucial ways. First, those involved used direct action, consciously bypassing formal consultation processes. Secondly, activists engaged in promoting a counter-culture, often centred upon anarchistic ideals and values. They were also critical of long-standing

environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, which they saw as having become part of the establishment. Thirdly, protesters utilized particular tactics. These often involved 'headline grabbing' schemes such as occupying trees in areas to be cleared for road-building or digging tunnels under areas marked for airport runway expansion.

### The End of History?

Whether the forces representing new social movements can transcend their marginal political position to create a new political paradigm remains to be seen. The notion that society has moved into a new political paradigm is also revealed in Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Here he argues that the fall of the Soviet bloc has brought about a global triumph and the final victory of 'liberal democracy' as there is no longer any countervailing ideology left to serve as an antithesis. For Fukuyama, the dominant Western free market juggernaut prevails and effectively ends the conflict and friction that generate historical events and shape the flow of history.

Hence, unlike Hegel or Marx, Fukuyama believes that history ends not with the evolution of a classless society of communism, but rather with the triumph of 'democratic capitalism'. Fukuyama sees history developing through a series of stages, the result of economic progress, internal contradictions and political struggle. Indeed, the result is what Fukuyama calls a Marxist approach in an effort to reach a 'non-Marxist' conclusion.

Fukuyama claims that it is liberal democratic capitalism which is most 'in tune' with human nature and its related aspirations. For him, it is liberal-democratic capitalism that goes furthest in satisfying the needs of citizens, through the ability to vote and the rights that are acknowledged by the modern liberal state. The material desires of all humans, their capacity for reason and spiritual aspirations, have all gradually developed through the various stages of history.

In most societies these desires and aspirations have been restrained but with the advent of the Enlightenment and the English, French and American Revolutions these have come to fruition with the triumph of the bourgeoisie over its feudal rivals. Following Hegel, Fukuyama claims that once the bourgeois democratic system was initially established it was only a matter of time before it, first, was perfected in the West, and secondly, spread outwards to engulf the globe.

Commentators from across a broad political spectrum have found it difficult to ignore Fukuyama's basic message that there is now no ideological alternative to universal liberal-democratic capitalism. Fukuyama further argues that history is at an end. This is not history in the sense of everyday happenings or political events. Rather, it is history with a capital 'H' that is over. By this he largely means the struggle between ideologies and the systems they represent. This trend has, however, produced individuals who are solely pre-occupied with their 'private lives'.

People are increasingly focused on individual pursuits and individualized lifestyles, such as shopping, keeping fit, listening to personal stereos, watching television and so on. These are selfish individuals, who no longer engage in ideological warfare or in the struggle for ideas.

In a later work, Fukuyama (1995) addresses what he sees as the cultural variations within societies at the end of the twentieth century. Here Fukuyama argues that the successful operation of capitalism can best be achieved by nations with high cultural assets, the most

important of which is trust (or cohesion) with civil society. An ability to extend trust throughout a society is essential for the smooth running of modern corporate capitalism. Hence, America, Japan and Germany have high levels of trust, while other societies such as France, Italy and China have low levels.

For Fukuyama, while the free market is essential, it can only account for part of the story. The rest involves a degree of cultural cohesion, which lies at the heart of the economic and social requirement. This new argument from Fukuyama suggests some recognition that even if the broad universal ideological arguments are over, there are still huge variations and tensions within the capitalist nations that need to be understood and analysed.

In *Trust* (1995) Fukuyama tries to address the issue of social problems by indicating that certain forms of economic and social arrangements and liberal-democratic governments are more successful than others in dealing with these. While Fukuyama's ideas have raised much criticism (see below), it is clear that he is engaged in explaining some very real changes in contemporary society. For this reason, it is necessary to consider other perspectives on politics and the postmodern condition.

Fukuyama's works suggest that all societies must now progress towards modernity. That there is nothing to which societies can evolve beyond liberal democracy and free markets. Hence, the end of history. In a recent work, Fukuyama (2001) suggests that society remains at the end of history because 'there is only one system that will continue to dominate world politics, that of the liberal-democratic west'. Those conflicts that remain consist of a series of rearguard actions by those societies whose traditional existence are threatened by modernization.

So while Fukuyama may not now claim that there are no major social divisions to be overcome at the 'end of history', he still clearly believes that these issues can still only be addressed within the framework of the primacy of the structures and demands of liberal-democratic capitalism. The main thrust of his ideas must be seen as being very much of their time. In the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, for example, Thatcher was still claiming to be waging war on socialism. The fall of the Communist bloc in 1989 provided an increasing dynamic for Fukuyama's views. The economic and political position of the United Kingdom meant that many could simply not envisage anything other than an energetic consumer-led economy, driven by the forces of neoliberalism.

Any 'final victory' of liberal democracy, however, must be seen as an extremely shallow one. The period of the 'end of history' has revealed far too much continuity to be the end of anything. The West has continued to find its position under threat from a wide variety of sources. Capitalism has shuddered and oscillated along its 'inevitable road' and the realities of economic difference have become stark. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that severe poverty is now the earth's biggest killer (Harman, 1995: 7). The differences in the economies of the developed and developing worlds do not seem to lessen. Moreover, the central ideological liberal democracy faces ongoing challenge. The growth of political Islam, radical nationalisms, the bloody battles in and around the Balkans and the former Soviet states, and the events following the attacks on 11 September 2001 in the USA continue to undermine Fukuyama's supposed consensus.

### **The End of Politics?**

As Grossberg (1992: 89) points out, by the beginning of the 1990s it was increasingly difficult

to gain a handle on 'the rapidly changing political alliances, positions and struggles of contemporary life'. Certainly, knowledge and politics anchored in modernity have been subject to a severe crisis in confidence and has become increasingly fragmented in its response. What remains are competing identity politics and fluid political alliances, which are often formed at the micro level. These alliances, by their nature, are unpredictable in their formation and continuance. So, for example, it is possible to find Marxists, feminists and gays and eco-warriors in complete unison on one issue and at total loggerheads on another.

If we continue with this line of thinking, we come to an alternative position that we are experiencing a dramatic change in the nature of politics itself. There are even some who characterize the contemporary period as heralding the end of politics (see Boggs, 2000; Mulgan, 1994). This builds on recent analyses overflowing with the notion that the old order has come to an end. We have, for example, already encountered Fukuyama's (1992) notion of 'the end of history'. Baudrillard's (1998a, 1998b) celebration of difference and concept of 'the end of the social' reflects a parallel theme.

For those supportive of postmodernism, the politics of 'the Nation', 'the People' or 'the Party' are to be doomed for their totalizing aspirations. So, too, must be the idea of a coherent political self. According to its advocates, the political has become the cultural. Politics now operates through a multitude of groups and identities in civil society and the expression of a wide variety of individual issues.

Politics it is argued must adapt to a new 'mix-and-match' society, where it has become increasingly less relevant to people's identities and priorities. This is reflected in the rising level of disillusionment expressed at the common level regarding politics and politicians. There are many examples of this in the public arena. In the last European elections, fewer than one in four of those eligible voted in the United Kingdom. In the 1997 devolution elections for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, turnout was also remarkably low. Indeed, in the Leeds Central by-election of the same year, the turnout, at 19.6 per cent, was the lowest since the Second World War.

In the May 1997 UK general election only 71 per cent voted, the lowest number since the war. The pattern was reinforced in the 2001 general election, when the turnout was even lower with around 16 million of those eligible choosing not to vote. The turnout of 59.1 per cent meant that only one in four voters backed the newly re-elected New Labour government. Across much of the Western world polls reveal large numbers of citizens who endorse the view that their country's government cannot be trusted, and that their nation's economy is being mismanaged.

For some commentators, this turn away from the ballot box undermines the legitimacy of state institutions and perhaps the entire political system. The notion of the end of politics is addressed directly by Boggs (2000), who questions the 'triumph' of liberal democracy and free market capitalism. Rather, he laments the loss of civic participation in the contemporary USA, and argues that the new political sphere fails to include broad participation, generally operating only on behalf of corporate interests. While recognizing the multiple grassroots organizations throughout the country, he suggests that such organizations are increasingly disconnected from wider national and global issues.

Indeed, Boggs argues further that such organizations are depoliticized by our increasingly corporate-dominated culture, ensuring an end of politics which has lost its visionary and empowering qualities. This depoliticized culture results in an anti-political climate, and occurs when individual interests surpass any notion of a commitment to collective values or the

collective goals of society. These processes of corporatization, depoliticization and anti-politics have all thrown the public sphere into deep crisis. From this perspective, politics simply has not kept in step with the new organizing principles of society, based largely around individualism and egalitarianism.

If one adds to this the seemingly dramatic decline in the role of the state and the dissolving of the legitimacy and authority of politicians, then the traditional arena of politics is seen as incapable of directly confronting the real issues of contemporary society. Such arguments continue to find resonance in the everyday. At one level, recent political manifestos, the smooth-running 'soundbite' and professionally staged party conferences give credence to the belief that the categories of Left and Right have become increasingly problematic in the politics of the United Kingdom. As Hertz puts it:

Ideology competes with ice-cream. Politicians become salespeople, offering more and more: lower tax, better schools, more funding for the NHS. It is a double switch: politics has entered commerce; consumerism has entered politics. Unless politicians provide the same levels of service in hospitals and schools, the same quick response to our concerns and make the same effort to meet our needs as do Tesco and Sainsbury's, they will forfeit our custom. Corporations, realising how fickle our vote is, have to become even more conscientious, responsible and accountable, or face our defection. (Hertz, 1999: 105)

At any level it would be strange if the sociological changes outlined in this book had not resulted in political transformations. The core question is just how far political culture has been altered and what continuities may be identified? Corporations are certainly much more powerful than they used to be, but is there a danger of under-estimating the remaining powers of governments and the state? Global financial markets may constrain, but the state in the United Kingdom still allocates the spending of a large percentage of the GDP. How then should we understand the changes outlined above?

### **Postmodernism and Politics**

Postmodernism offers one set of explanations for many of the contemporary changes in society. It differs from other cultural forms by its emphasis on the fragmentation of the subject. Postmodernism rejects as irrelevant all existing metanarrative explanations such as Marxism or feminism. Hence, individualism is seen to replace collective loyalties such as class, religion, ethnicity or gender.

Within this perspective there is a loss of the centre, and history is without a core subject (Ashley, 1997). Postmodernist works are often characterized by a lack of depth and are concerned with surface, not substance. Individuals are no longer seen as anomic because there is nothing from which one can sever ties. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings are now free-floating and impersonal. Also distinctive of the late capitalist age is the recycling of old images and commodities, for example in the works of Andy Warhol.

Jameson (1984, 1985, 1998) refers to this cultural recycling as historicism: the random cannibalization of all styles of the past. It is demonstrated by the increasing primacy of the 'neo' and a world transformed into sheer images of itself. The organic tie of history to past events is lost. All of these cultural forms are indicative of postmodernism, late capitalism, or what Jameson calls 'present-day multinational capitalism'.

Considering such developments, several key contemporary Marxist writers (see Callinicos, 1991; Geras, 1987, 1995) have been at best negative, at worst downright hostile to the development of postmodern thought. Rather than regarding it as having emancipatory qualities, they see it as largely reactionary in nature. Hence, despite the so-called triumph of liberal-capitalist democracy, there continues to be strong defenders of neo-classical Marxism.

Callinicos, for one, believes that Marxism retains its integrity despite the weakening appeal of communism around the world. Hence, in *The Revenge of History* (1991) Callinicos argues that the liberal-democratic state has broken its major promises in three main ways: first, involving participation; secondly, the promise of control from below; and thirdly, the supposed freedom to protest and reform. Liberal-capitalist democracy fails, he argues, on all three counts and there are substantial constraints on state action, in particular on the possibility of reform of capitalism: 'the flight of capital is a habitual threat to elected governments with strong programmes of social reform' (Callinicos, 1991: 109).

Given this failure and the inability to solve the problems generated by capitalism, Callinicos attempts strongly to defend classical Marxism. In his opinion, an alternative to liberal-capitalist democracy can be found if we look to Soviet 'democracy' prior to Stalinism. Callinicos sees Stalinism as a counterrevolutionary force that created a 'state capitalist' regime in which the state bureaucracy fulfilled the role once performed by the bourgeoisie. Events between 1989 and 1991 cannot, therefore, be understood in Fukuyama's terms as the defeat of Marxism. Rather, it marked defeat for what was a mutilation of Marxism, resulting in authoritarian Stalinism.

The period of the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed not a victory for 'democracy' but rather a triumph for 'unregulated capitalism'. For Callinicos, what the revolutions in the old Eastern bloc largely achieved was a political re-organization of the Eastern ruling classes, which allowed them to integrate their economies into the global market. In a series of debates with Fukuyama, Callinicos asserts that the latter's 'capitalist utopianism' fails to recognize the problems of poverty and exploitation which capitalism is incapable of overcoming because they are inherent in the system itself.

From another critical perspective, Jameson (1984, 1985, 1998) is also derogatory of the postmodern project, highlighting the differences in culture between the modern and postmodern periods. He also devotes much time to the effects of these changes on the individual, concerned as he is with the cultural expressions and forms of aesthetics associated with the different systems of production. Indeed, Jameson draws across the fields of architecture, art and other culturally expressive forms to illustrate his beliefs, arguing that it is essential to grasp postmodernism as a dominant cultural form of late capitalism.

These perspectives are underscored by Mandel's thesis (1975) that there have been three fundamental moments in capitalism, each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage. These are market capitalism, monopoly capitalism and, what our own period most correctly called multinational capitalism (and in Mandel's view wrongly labelled as postindustrial). Mandel's proposition is that late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great nineteenth-century analysis, on the contrary constitutes the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, marking a monumental expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas.

Following on from this, Jameson claims that there has been a radical shift in the material world and in the ways in which it works. It is therefore appropriate to distinguish several



generations of technological revolution within capitalism. Fundamental revolutions in technology thus often appear to be the determinant movements in revolutions in society as a whole. Jameson (1985, 1998) argues that by eradicating older forms, the contemporary mode has extended into all aspects of life. What Jameson (and others) seek to do is to highlight the cultural and political consequences of this. Not all, however, seek to do so within the parameters of classical or neo-classical Marxism.

### Reformulating Politics

Indeed, whether or not we accept the validity of the postmodern argument, it is clear that there are difficulties with the relevance of the traditional Marxist model. Not least of these is those growing number of challenges to the contemporary political order, and political mobilizations, which are not easily accounted for in class terms. The significance of such non-class issues should not be underestimated, or the fragmentation of political identity it involves (see Bradley, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mulgan, 1994). While the assault on social democracy led by Thatcher and Major has been resisted by key sections of the electorate and populist mobilizations, they have succeeded in establishing the legitimacy of their central principles – the individual and the market.

For Laclau (1993) classical socialism was based on increasing social homogeneity. Traditionally, socialism has been thought of as the social management of the economic process, Marxism regards the state as an instrument of class domination. The discourse of both classical socialism and Marxism is based on the homogenization of the social structure, and the development of a class that is able to manage socially the productive processes. Importantly, for Laclau, Marxism ignores the rest of society.

In seeking to explain this, Laclau promotes what he calls 'radical democracy'. Laclau (1993: 6) claims that the present crisis of the Left is not so much linked to the failure of concrete policies. Rather, it is the fact that 'both communism and social democracy, the two classical imaginary horizons of the left, have ceased to galvanise the imagination of the masses and are no longer viable languages for the expression of radical social demands'.

Alternatively, radical democracy starts from the 'irreducible idea of social plurality'. It rests on the argument that late capitalist society, far from becoming homogeneous, is 'going in the direction of proliferation and fragmentation of antagonisms'. This means that there is no 'essential unity' of classes. From this perspective, there are alliances that need to be identified and then politically constructed. In trying to account for this perceived shift in emphasis away from workers' movements, several writers have been forced to ask if it is still useful to talk of politics in terms of a Right-Left political divide.

The answer is certainly 'no', according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who argue that traditional socialist demands have been replaced by more nebulous demands for 'freedom', 'democracy'. They further argue that those modern social movements, such as feminism, the peace and anti-nuclear movements, are autonomous and remain incapable of any final synthesis. What is called for is a 'democratic revolution' where the Left actively and consciously establishes links with the new social movements rather than seeking any imposition of Marxist ideology.

Let us consider what some see as the transition from modernity to postmodernity and the consequences for politics. From the perspective of postmodernism, the attempts of Laclau and Mouffe to construct post-Marxism is merely recognition of the decline of Marxism as a 'grand narrative'. Another perspective comes from Gorz (1994), who argues that throughout

the 1970s and 1980s the Left led social democracy into a cul-de-sac. With the world economic crisis competition grew stronger, and economic and social development was increasingly determined by the strategies of global capitalism. Hence, individual nation-states found it increasingly difficult to control their own destiny in socio-economic terms. Unrestricted competition on the free market meant that many economic decisions remained outside the parameters of politics. In the West, the dismantling of the advanced welfare state increased social inequality.

One response has been in the already identified 'new social movements', such as the Green and ecology movements, which demand changes in the nature of 'radical' politics. As Gorz (1994) puts it, the established parties of the Left are programmed for statist politics, for the administration of a system and for securing votes, so they cannot make a fresh start. The Old Left, which consists largely of the working class, tends to emphasize economic growth, redistribution and technological progress. As Offe (1985) argues, however, wage labour can no longer be taken as a point of departure for 'political associations and collective identities'. Hence, only an alliance between the new social movements and the traditional Left, comprising the unionized working class and elements of the new middle class, can lead to an effective and successful challenge of the old paradigm of politics.

### **Post-Industrialism, Politics and the State**

The dramatic changes in the structures of the advanced world, some of which have been described in this book, involving new technologies, new values, ideologies, changing lines of social conflict and social contestation, has led to the popular use of the term post-industrialism to describe the contemporary world. This highlights the declining dependence of some societies on manufacturing industry and the rise of service industries, and an emphasis on consumption and leisure.

In seeking to explain this, the term 'capitalism' is retained by some theorists of post-industrialism and abandoned by others. So, for example, sometimes the term 'post-industrial capitalism' is used to denote the idea that post-industrial society remains fundamentally capitalist. At other times, however, the term 'post-industrial' is used to convey the idea that society is also post-capitalist. This makes the debate sometimes difficult to follow at times, but worth considering in rather more detail.

### **Post-Industrialism – an Optimistic Gaze**

It was with Bell that the term 'post-industrialism' came into its contemporary usage and it is with his works that we shall begin this discussion. Bell (1973) sought to go beyond those existing theories that sought to classify advanced societies as 'industrial'. Manufacturing employment is seen as in major decline (factories producing commodities are increasingly displacing labour with the introduction of new technologies). Service employment is seen as a major growth area, especially in relation to collecting, processing and distributing information. This transition must be viewed against the background of economic theory that has a tripartite division by kind of work: first, the primary sector, in agriculture and the extraction of raw materials; secondly, the secondary sector, in which goods and commodities are manufactured; thirdly, the tertiary or service sector, in which everything else not included in the other two categories is lumped.

Using these categories, it is clear that the primary sector has declined dramatically and the majority of those employed are not involved in the production of tangible goods. The manual

and unskilled worker class gets smaller and the class of knowledge workers becomes predominant. The character of knowledge also changes and an emphasis is put on theoretical rather than empirical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is the impetus of innovation and growth. Because of this, universities will become central institutions and prestige and status will be rooted in the intellectual and scientific communities.

Another feature of the post-industrial society is the speeding up of the 'time machine', so those intervals between the initial forces of change and their application have been dramatically reduced. Technocracy is thus defined as a political system in which the determining influence belongs to technicians of the administration and of the economy. A technocrat is a person who exercises authority by virtue of his or her technical competence. Within the technocratic mindset, the emphasis is on the logical, practical, problem-solving, instrumental, orderly, and disciplined approach to objectives, and a concept of a system (Bell, 1973: 348–9).

This does not necessarily mean, however, that the technocrats themselves will become a dominant class. In post-industrial societies, the stratum of scientists will have to be taken into account in the political process. In addition, the scientific ethos will predispose scientists to act in a different fashion, politically, from other groups. Class denotes not a specific group of persons, but a system that has institutionalized the ground rules for acquiring, holding and transferring differential power and its attendant privileges.

Society has become rational, that is, government, rather than the market, makes crucial decisions. It has also become communal, that is, more groups now seek to establish their social rights through the political order. The politics of the future will not involve quarrels between interest groups over economic resources, but the concerns of a communal society, particularly the inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

There are difficulties with this sort of classification, not least the highly diverse kind of employment it brings together into the single category of 'services'. This can be highlighted by a simple example, whereby an employee in a fast-food restaurant is included in the same category as a computer programmer.

Bell tends to ignore such objections by identifying 'services' with the professions and credentialization. The increased part played by science in the productive process, the rise to prominence of professional and technical groups, plus the introduction of 'information technology', all bear witness to a new 'axial principle', the 'energising principle of the new social formation is the centrality of theoretical knowledge' (Bell, 1973: 52).

For Bell, science and theoretical knowledge is the key resource in post-industrial society. It replaces the 'game against fabricated nature' (the work of transformation of matter on the assembly line or workshop) with that of a 'game involving persons' (the relationship of the professional to client) and the production of information.

This new social assemblage has been captured and understood differently by others. Most do not share Bell's view of the benefits of the new social order. Indeed, while there are many who agree with the view that new technologies mean that mass manufacturing employment is at an end, they take a much more pessimistic view of the contemporary world and that society may become more rational and communal in its direction.

### **Post-Industrialism – a Pessimistic Gaze**

The writings of Jean-François Lyotard (1979) provide a useful starting point for this perspective. He argues that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s. Indeed, in broad terms, this view of the transformation from industrial society to post-industrial society is in line with Bell's. However, the political implications of Lyotard's ideas are quite different. While Bell is in essence a neoconservative, who argues that the conflicts of capitalist industrial society are over, Lyotard argues that such conflicts will be reconstructed.

For Lyotard, it is knowledge that has become the principal force of production over the last few decades. This has had the noticeable effect on the composition of the workforce of the most highly developed countries and constitutes a major bottleneck for the developing countries. In this scenario, the 'metropolis' will maintain its hold over the 'periphery' by monopolizing information and technologies.

To highlight the fact that post-industrial society is characterized by conflict, Lyotard argues that knowledge is already, and will continue to be, central in the worldwide competition for power. For him, it is fully conceivable that nations will one day battle for the control of information, just as in the past they struggled for access and control of raw materials and cheap labour. A new field is opened up for industrial and commercial strategies, on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other.

For some postmodern thinkers this world of information technology produces a situation where social relations are converted into electronic signs. To the fore of this set of beliefs is Baudrillard, who argues that this has led to what he calls a totally hyperreal and simulated world, which has imploded in on itself, leading to the collapse of all the classical reference points, such as class, proletariat and objective conditions.

Baudrillard (1998a, 1998b, 1993, 1996) thus suggests that the only point of reference which still functions is that of the silent majority. All contemporary systems function on this entity – no longer social, but statistical. His vision of post-industrial, postmodern society is one that is dominated by electronic images, computer matrices and the all-enveloping media event. There are clear examples, especially the USA, which is seen as the first hyperreal country. It operates on the level of the sign and of the symbols which are more and more obviously seen in the representations of Coca-Cola, McDonalds and so on.

Further, Baudrillard outlines what he sees as the dramatic ways in which post-industrial technologies will affect our culture and ways of imagining and thinking. Again, unlike Bell, who is optimistic about these technologies, Baudrillard takes a much more pessimistic reading regarding new technologies as 'machines for destroying meaning'. Baudrillard's image of society is one where the vast majority will largely be consumers of images, such as video, advertising, montages of pop songs and so on.

### **Post-Industrialism – Post-Marxist and Postfeminist Perspectives**

Others believe that the version of post-industrialism associated with Bell gives too much emphasis to the causal qualities of changing technologies. Indeed, Jameson (1984, 1991) has written that technology from the Marxist gaze must be seen as 'the result of the development of capital, rather than some primal cause in its own right'. Hence, apart from the optimism of Bell, and the somewhat pessimistic views of Baudrillard, there is also a third perspective within post-industrialism theorizing. This can be seen as both radical and post-Marxist and is

associated with such writers as Gorz (1980, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1994), Bahro (1982, 1983, 1986) and Touraine (1971, 1981, 1983).

Touraine, for example, adopting a 'post-Marxist' position, argues that the characteristic feature of post-industrial society is that the central investments are now made at the level of production management, and not at the level of the work-based organization, as in the case of industrial society. Class domination consists less of organizing work and more in managing the production and data-processing apparatus, that is, ensuring the control of the supply and processing of a certain type of data, and hence of a way of organizing social life. Thus, it is not the struggle between representatives of capital and labour which is now central, but the difference between various kinds of consumers and those who identify with particular consumer brands.

Political action in post-industrial society is all-pervading. It enters into the health service, into sexuality, into education and into energy production and so on. For Touraine, the workers' movement is no longer the key dynamic factoring society. The lines of social contestation are more between the technocracy and the new social movements, based on new values and ideas, which have been called post-materialist by writers such as Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe.

Unlike Bell, however, Touraine also believes that society is still based on conflict. This line of analysis has been further developed by Gorz, who has argued that post-industrial development, such as the introduction of 'new technology', will lead to a massive displacement of labour (unemployment and under-employment) and the formation of a mass of people on part-time work and short-term contracts. They will form part of a 'flexible' workforce that can be drawn in and out of the labour market to suit the requirements of the employer.

These people form what Gorz calls a class of 'non-workers', who have no identification with the traditional proletariat and form a core identity far beyond that which originates in the workplace. As Gorz (1994: 72) asserts, the 'criticism of capitalism and socialist sensibility are not to be derived from their working lives or their class consciousness but, rather, from the discovery they make as citizens, parents, consumers, residents of a neighbourhood or town, of capitalist development dispossessing them of their – social and natural – lifeworld'.

Elsewhere, Gorz articulates the vision of a post-Fordist and post-Thatcherite world. Clear divisions have opened up between, on the one hand, a labour aristocracy of tenured primary workers with jobs, who are 'functionally flexible' and on the other hand, a marginalized and peripheral class of workers employed irregularly and on a part-time basis and which are located in secondary labour markets. From this view, post-industrial society means an ever-expanding and increasingly marginalized grouping – an underclass.

Some have sought to explain such events within postmodern frameworks, in the sense that they seek to create distance from beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and languages that are taken for granted within. It is possible to see here the concerns of both postmodernism and feminism as to some extent interrelated. Both contemporary feminists and postmodernists have sought to develop their own paradigms of social criticism that essentially challenge the founding writers of social and political theories, such as those outlined in [Chapter 1](#).

## Some Conclusions

As this chapter has indicated, there are many different views on the existence, nature and form of the new politics in society. New social movements, for example, seek to achieve their effects in a variety of ways. First, they exert cultural influence. This can be seen, for example, in 'style' through impact on gender relations, new values and lifestyles. In other words, new social movements often change the cultural values within which politics operates.

Secondly, social movements have a more direct effect on politics and decision-making through absorption of their central prerequisites. There are also cases of overlapping demands between social movements. In the 1980s, for example, the anti-nuclear protests at Greenham Common saw clear overlaps between the feminist and broader peace movements. By challenging the boundary between state and civic society, definitions of what constitutes a political issue can be altered. Social movements work within civil society and interact with the state.

Thirdly, social movements are not defined simply by ideology but also by the organizational features of the resources they command. Most social movements have identifiable 'life-cycles'. They begin with high levels of mobilization around specific issues and end with the incorporation of the movements into mainstream decision-making organizations.

Some of the strongest critiques of contemporary society have come from postmodernist and feminist perspectives. Both sets of theories offer new and useful tools for looking at relationships between politics and power. Some postmodernists, for example, have sought to 'decentre' the modern subject in a radical way, arguing that people are created through discourses which are culturally and historically specific and generally unconscious. Thus, there is no all-powerful subject capable of manipulating discourse. Such perspectives clearly suggest that the dynamic of contemporary politics has moved a long way from traditional political formations and has heralded the onset of a new politics. We shall consider the idea that a new politics is in formation more fully in the final chapter.

#### Discussion Questions

- **Critically examine sociological contributions to an understanding of the nature of power in post-industrial societies.**
- **Discuss the idea that class politics has completely given way to a politics based in new social movements.**
- **What do contemporary feminist perspectives add to our understanding of politics and society?**
- **Does postmodernism provide the evidence to enable us to understand the move towards more fragmented and pluralistic societies?**
- **Are we experiencing the end of politics?**

- underclass
- postindustrialism
- social movements
- marxism
- industrial society
- politics
- capitalism

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