

Martin Jacques: Embittered British Stalinist pronounces on death of the ‘left’

Chris Marsden
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This is the first of a two-part article. Part 2 was published on December 16.

Martin Jacques is a regular columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper. On November 20, it published a comment by him proclaiming, “The only show in town: The left, as history knew it, is dead—and it will not be reborn.”

Jacques is billed as a “visiting fellow at the London School of Economics Asia Research Centre.” But as many *Guardian* readers will know, he was formerly the editor of *Marxism Today*, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) which achieved some prominence during the 1980s. It is in this capacity, and not due to any specialised knowledge of Asia, that Jacques’ comments were solicited.

Presented as the observations of a dispassionate academic and journalist, the aim of Jacques’ article is to assert that Prime Minister Tony Blair is presently “the only show in town”, because “there is no serious, ideologically based opposition to Blair within the party”.

Jacques goes further than this somewhat obvious statement. He argues that the collapse of any left-wing alternative to Blair and his New Labour project—in what he himself admits to be “in the broadest sense”—is that the labour movement as it was no longer exists. In turn, the labour movement’s collapse in Britain and throughout Europe is due to what he terms “the loss of agency, the decline of the industrial working class and its consequent erosion as a meaningful and effective political force.”

This, he insists, is related to the collapse of communism which, despite ideological differences, shared with social democracy, “in different ways, the vision of a better society based on collectivist principles.”

Finally, Jacques asserts that though the imperatives that gave rise to the labour movement, social inequality and opposition to imperialism, have been “steadily increasing”. “The left, as history knew it,” he writes, “will not be reborn.” Instead, opposition to these twin evils will “find expression in new forms, albeit in a world where Europe counts for far less and ethnicity for far more.”

The Communist Party of Great Britain

Jacques deserves an answer.

Firstly, because this provides an opportunity to examine the role played by Stalinism in ensuring the collapse of the old labour movement, and of his own “Euro-Communist” tendency in acting as the midwife of New Labour.

Secondly, because the claim that the “left” is finished and that the future belongs to ethnic and nationalist movements must be refuted.

The assertion underlying everything Jacques writes is that the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies were the legitimate political representatives of the industrial working class and thus collectively constituted the labour movement and the “left”.

In truth the ability of these bureaucracies to dominate the political life of the working class in the twentieth century was rooted in the murderous suppression of the Marxist and revolutionary opposition to Stalinism in

the Soviet Union, as represented by the followers of Leon Trotsky.

Jacques may now portray himself as merely a respectable left-leaning liberal, but his political biography cannot be understood apart from his decision to join a party that had the primary aim of ruthlessly suppressing the independent revolutionary activity of the working class. Even his portrayal of the “left” as including, and even consisting of, ageing right-wing Labourites such as Roy Hattersley and Dennis Healey is ultimately a continuation of the earlier and more brutal efforts by his political ancestors to expunge the revolutionary left from the political scene.

By the time Jacques joined the CPGB, any connection it had with revolutionary politics was a distant memory. Its support for and financing by Moscow in no way contradicted its essential loyalty to British capitalism, as expressed in its insistence that nothing must be done that would undermine the domination of the Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) over the working class.

As early as 1938, Trotsky wrote in “A Fresh lesson on the character of the coming war”:

“As regards the ex-Comintern, its social basis, properly speaking, is of a twofold nature: On the one hand, it lives on the subsidies of the Kremlin, submits to the latter’s commands, and, in this respect, every ex-communist bureaucrat is the younger brother and subordinate of the Soviet bureaucrat. On the other hand, the various machines of the ex-Comintern feed from the same sources as the social democracy that is the super-profits of imperialism.

“The growth of the Communist Parties in recent years, their infiltration into the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, their installation in the state machinery, the trade unions, parliaments, municipalities, etc., have strengthened in the extreme their dependence on national imperialism at the expense of their traditional dependence on the Kremlin.

“Ten years ago it was predicted that the theory of socialism in one country must inevitably lead to the growth of nationalist tendencies in the sections of the Comintern. This prediction has become an obvious fact.”

The Second World War and Stalin’s alliance with the western powers had the effect of deepening the collaboration with and dependence on their own bourgeoisie of the various national Communist Parties. This was codified in the CP’s 1951 perspectives document, “The British Road to Socialism”, which defined the party as an adjunct and apologist for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy committed to nothing other than the election of a Labour government.

It proclaimed, “The enemies of communism accuse the Communist Party of aiming to introduce Soviet power in Britain and abolish parliament. This is a slanderous misrepresentation of our policy... Britain will reach socialism by her own road. The people of Britain can transform capitalist democracy into a real People’s Democracy, transforming parliament, the product of Britain’s historic struggle for democracy, in to the will of the vast majority of her people.”

Jacques became the ideological leader of that faction of the CP which went furthest in its adaptation to British imperialism, as expressed in its

readiness to break with any semblance of opposition to capitalism. If there was once any confusion regarding the right-wing character of Euro-Communism, it was because of its readiness to criticise certain aspects of Stalinist repression such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But this was only ever a means of making itself acceptable to the rightwing of social democracy and the trade union bureaucracy.

This gave rise to a split within the CP between the Euros and the hardliners, or Tankies as they became known, due to their rival efforts to secure Moscow's backing. But as events proved it was the Euros that best reflected the outlook and interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. Their rejection of even a reformist alternative to capitalism anticipated by only a few years the restoration of capitalism under first Mikhail Gorbachev and later Boris Yeltsin.

The role of *Marxism Today*

Indeed, it can be stated that the ideological framework for what was to become New Labour was first laid down in the editorial offices of *Marxism Today*. And it was largely made possible to implement the project so defined due above all to the liquidation of the Soviet Union.

In the aftermath of the election of the Thatcher Conservative government in 1979, *Marxism Today* focused all its efforts on insisting that it was no longer possible to advocate the old policies of social reforms and welfare.

One of the leading Euros was the historian Eric Hobsbawm. He anticipated the line that the journal would follow in his Marx Memorial Lecture in 1978. Like Jacques today, Hobsbawm too began by asserting that the crisis of the labour movement could be attributed to the decline of the working class itself. His evidence for this essentially consisted of a presentation of the fall in the number of workers employed in heavy industry and the supposedly concomitant fall in support for the Labour and Communist parties. He then argued that industrial militancy had failed to provide an answer to the failures of the Labour government of the time.

Hobsbawm's lecture was not simply unconvincing. It was an attempt to provide an apologia for the betrayal of the working class by Labour and the TUC. He was writing after the election of a Labour government in 1974 as a result of a mass militant movement that culminated in the downfall of the previous Conservative government of Edward Heath. After making certain minimal concessions to the miners, who had led that movement, Labour had proceeded to implement austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and, when this produced a major decline in its support amongst workers, had formed a coalition with the Liberal Party in order to continue with its attacks.

Hobsbawm responded to this by blaming the working class—and identifying a supposed decline in its numerical strength—for Labour's loss of support.

His was also an attempt to conceal the political betrayals of his party. For it was the CP which, throughout the post-war period, had confined every major struggle waged by the working class to a perspective of trade union militancy and bringing Labour to power.

Between 1978/79 the conflict between the working class and the Labour government of James Callaghan came to an explosive dénouement in the "Winter of Discontent". Thanks to the refusal of the trade unions, the CP and the various left groups to take up the struggle for a political alternative to Labour, it was the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher who benefited from the collapse in Labour's support. This only served to hasten the Euros lurch to the right and to convince them that it was no longer possible to suppress the working class by insisting on loyal support for Labour. What was required was a stepping up of the ideological attack on any conception of independent working class politics.

Jacques in his *Guardian* article criticises Blair for his close ideological relationship to Thatcher. But *Marxism Today* in fact took Thatcherism as the template for its entire perspective.

Thatcher's government represented the break by British imperialism

with the economic, political and social nostrums of Keynesian national economic regulation and welfare state measures. In order to offset declining profitability, Thatcher set out to eliminate inefficient industries that had once been protected as national champions, open up the economy to international speculation and privatisation and to develop Britain's own role as an international financial power. Of necessity this meant breaking with any attempt to maintain a social consensus through the type of reforms made possible by subsidies and economic regulation. Hers was to be a government of class war, not class compromise.

She sought to develop a social basis for these policies by buying off a section of the middle class and skilled workers, giving them a share of the spoils from the sell-off of state assets and tax cuts made at the expense of the elimination of social provisions for the poor.

These policies found a response in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, who over the next decade swiftly abandoned the bulk of its old reformist programme. Immediately after the 1979 election the Social Democratic Party emerged as a right-wing break away from Labour, advocating the abandonment of any commitment to nationalisation and any connection with the trade unions. By 1983 the trade unions had ditched any opposition to Thatcher's anti-union laws and Michael Foot, who had been elected Labour Party leader as a left following the debacle of 1979, had been replaced by Neil Kinnock—who was to lay down the path followed later by Blair of seeking to make the party "electable" by competing with Thatcher for the support of Tory voters in marginal constituencies.

The high point of the efforts of Labour and the TUC to cultivate the support of big business was their isolation of the miners during their year-long strike of 1984-85, which allowed the Tories to inflict the most devastating defeat suffered by the British working class since the 1926 General Strike.

In the pages of *Marxism Today* could be found the theoretical justification and apologia for all these developments. Rejecting any possibility of advancing a socialist agenda given the supposed non-existence of a significant working class, it argued for a coalition of anti-Thatcher forces to be built through the espousal of various forms of "identity" politics, in order to build an all-class movement to rival that supposedly created by the Tories. No one was to be excluded—Hobsbawm, for example, called for a tactical vote for the Social Democratic Party (SDP)—but the leadership of this new coalition naturally fell to Kinnock and the Labour Party.

To be continued



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