PART II

THE LEFT CURRENTS
DESCRIBED AND THEORISED
4 At sixes and sevens: the left’s post-WWII unease

Corsi al palude, e le cannucce e ‘l braco
m’impigliar si ch’i’ caddi; e li vid’ io
de le mie vene farsi in terra laco.

Dante, Purgatorio, Canto V, 82-84.

4.1 Introduction

Chapter one (section 1.2) touched on the thinking and practice that came together in the project of centrist rule of states, as that project unfolded during the 1990s. It is now time to say more about the origin and dynamics of late twentieth-century centrist rule of states. I shall use the shorthand term, ‘the centrist project,’ without wishing to suggest that any person, or any group, planned and controlled the project. To the contrary, the project was a piece of micropolitics, and as such it played a large part in the forming and organising of persons and groups that were involved in it.

The present chapter looks at what it was, in the period from the fifties through to the end of the eighties, that made the centrist project possible. This introductory section provides a quick sketch of the centrist project, and after that, it gives an overview of the rest of the chapter.

Centrist rule of states as a global affair (‘the centrist project’) in brief

The ground was prepared for the centrist project in the late seventies, with moves to run a lean government and to summon up fiercer winds of competition in US and British industry. Launching the moves were the populist new right (radical right) leaders, Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan. The new right appeared at a time when the burden of stagflation was weighing on Keynesian welfare states. Contributing to that burden were the 1971 collapse of the Bretton Woods system of currency alignment, and in 1973, the abrupt ending of the era of cheap oil.

A short time after Thatcher and Reagan formed their partnership, parties of the left commenced their uptake of the centrist project. Thus, in the early eighties, when New Zealanders voted their Labour Party into office, they were signing up for a dose of Rogernomics (Reaganomics, as applied by Roger Douglas, the NZ Treasurer). Next to tread
the centrist path were Australia’s Hawke and Keating Labor governments, of the eighties to the mid nineties.

Centrist rule then took hold in North America and Britain. President Clinton and Britain’s Labour Party leader Tony Blair became its global figureheads. But some three years ahead of Clinton’s ’92 election win, a ‘Washington consensus’ had materialised. Those who moved in the relevant circles were agreed on a ten-point template for use in the work of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The Washington consensus profoundly affected first Mexico, then other Third World countries that faced the threat, and/or the fact, of flights of external capital. Their governments learned that they must adopt centrist rule as part of the deals that were brokered by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to shore up the countries’ finances.

Centrist politics had previously flowered in the US during the Eisenhower years. The Cold War was at that time in the grim phase that preceded détente. The need to avoid nuclear conflict loomed large in thinking about national security; it seemed imperative that the centre should hold, that the nation should stand as one.

The success of centrist politics in the eighties and nineties was an altogether different matter. The Cold War wound down sooner than anyone had expected: with the USSR facing terminal economic decline, people’s movements sprang up and secured the collapse of one after another of the Soviet bloc states. In China too, reforms were afoot. South Africa ended apartheid. Right-wing governments in South East Asia met with open resistance, and the strong men that ruled in Latin America suffered reverses and allowed democratic forms to take hold. It seemed for a time, in the early nineties, that the spectrum of political views and programs had vanished for good, and not just in domestic politics but internationally. There would no longer be parties that vied for the state in a win-lose contest, to force their agendas on non-supporters; states, in ruling for the people, would also have the consent of all the people. As the commentator Francis Fukuyama put it – in the words that his critics were to throw back at him countless times – what was happening was ‘the end of history.’

What actually happened is a complex affair. Looking at developments from 1994 on, it seems possible that centrist rule spurred a renewal of the spectrum of political action. As observers of – and (to some degree or other) participants in – that mooted renewal, students of politics can form only tentative views at this stage. We are still at the start of what may be a long series of attempts and counter-attempts to unravel what was going on.

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1 (Williamson, 2002).
This much is clear: by the early nineties, the public in the West was becoming less actively supportive of the presence of major political parties in politics. The social democratic left had traditionally relied on a constituency it could call its own, the so-called ‘rusted on’ or true believers; now it no longer had such a constituency. There was a knock-on effect for groupings on the right, who had looked to the left as their ‘other’ and had rested their identity on that binary. Thus, both the left and the right, as encapsulated by mass political parties, lost some of their impetus. That raised the profile of the centrist project – the project of growing and maintaining a catch-all party; it also obscured whatever else was going on as regards the political spectrum.

Chapter overview

Before I can talk about the renewal of the political spectrum in the mid to late nineties, I need to deal with the currents that were sweeping the left around and along, from the fifties through to the early nineties. And it takes the rest of the present chapter to describe those currents. The discussion covers the huge disappointments, the rifts, and the tangent path-taking that happened over that period, causing many leftists to be sapped of energy as the nineties got under way.

Section 4.2 deals with the four broad facets of the postwar decline of the left. First, there was taking of sides, within the left, on issues of authority and liberation. The infighting went on across the whole plane: party, labour union, education, and social mores. Second, there was a determined attempt, in some quarters, to create a new project of the left, taking into account the loss of faith in the project of Enlightenment after the horrendous armed conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century. In other quarters of the left, that new project was reviled, with leftists attacking it as a betrayal of the cause. Third, work and society were reshaped as part of structural change in economies, stemming in part from a revolution in information technology. Fourth (and related to the third facet), there was a breakdown of the compromise that was the Keynesian welfare state.

2 From at least the 1970s onward, there has been a well documented rise in citizens’ engagement in politics through ‘political acts such as petitioning, consumer boycotts and demonstrations’ (Norris et al., 2003: p 14). The chief sources bearing out Norris’s statement are (Etzioni, 1970); (Barnes and Kaase, 1979); (Pross, 1992); and the four waves of the World Values Survey (World Values Survey, 2004)). Over the same three or so decades, there has been a falling-off of citizens’ partisanship (ie individuals are less inclined to identify with one or other major party), and a decline in membership of the major parties. Moreover, voter turnout reached 50-year lows in the US and the UK in the late 1990s (and dropped further still in the UK elections of 2001). Primary sources of data on the declines in party attachment and in voter turnout are: the National Election Studies of the Survey Research Centre / Center for Political Studies in the US (see tables in (Wattenberg, 1994); (Crewe et al., 1995); and (International Institute for Democracy and Assistance, 2004). While the facts as just stated are non-contentious, interpretations differ. In the seventies and again in the nineties, some scholars, and many popular commentators, warmed to the theme of a crisis in democracy, a crisis brought on by a new breed of disaffected rebel. The disaffected rebels were in turn held to be the product of a combination of forces. One of the explanations put forward was that there had been a generational shift from material to post-material values. Another suspected causal factor was the ongoing media revolution; a great deal was written on the thesis of democracy’s ‘media malaise’. Troublesome intellectuals were also blamed, as was the fact that the demands placed by citizens on their governments were slow to adapt to governments’ reduced means in times of economic stagnation. Works supporting the crisis/disaffected rebels thesis include (Huntington, 1974) and (Crozier et al., 1975); the thesis is revived in (Tolchin, 1996) and (Nye et al., 1997). I address the thesis of a democratic crisis in the next chapter (see, in particular, section 5.5).
Section 4.3 describes the grim condition the left had fallen into as the last quarter of the century rolled in. Punk – which had been the most vibrant form of cultural critique of the capitalist system, at least as far as the rising generation was concerned – was driven underground by commercialised youth culture. The left had lost its major party machinery to neoliberals, who used it in the centrist project. And what had been promising new social movements, had gotten mired in identity politics and culture wars, where they merely served the post-fordist market economy.

Section 4.4 points out that the setbacks just mentioned had a differential impact across the currents making up the left. The pragmatist left, which dates back to Machiavelli and even earlier, took less damage than the Enlightenment-humanist left. That turn of events was to lead to a post-humanist left gaining ground in the nineties.

4.2 Postwar decline of the left

Unresolved issues of authority and liberation

The people involved in left parties were well accustomed to operating as a collection of factions and splinter groups: that in itself was not a reason for the hard times that descended on them from the 1950s on. What was new, was the mood of despair that hung over the infighting. There was growing angst, and there was recrimination, over what was being done in the wake of revolutions that had been carried out in the name of peasants and workers. People’s democracies purported to be bearing out Marx’s analysis of human destiny, but they were proving to be flawed beyond repair, when measured by any standard.3

That there were grim sequels to the success of democratic revolutions was a fact of life, not a crime to pin on Marx. As Deleuze later commented, in Europe one had only to recall the deeds of Cromwell, or Napoleon, to see what sorry turns can follow in revolution’s wake. Constitutionalist settler states and their metropolitan hubs, by their past and ongoing acts, had shown all too clearly that, ‘There’s no democratic state that’s not compromised to the very core by its part in generating human misery’.4 In short, it was the West’s worst kept secret that democracy in the ‘free world’ had an ugly past, and that there was an ongoing dark side

3 Certain leftists had maintained, from the late 1920s onward, that there were flaws in the Communist project as actually practised. Chief among the dissidents were Trotsky and his followers, including Isaac Deutscher. In the thirties and forties, George Orwell had developed his own influential critique. But it was, above all, through the events of the fifties, sixties, and seventies that an ever-wider cross-section of the left, in the West, became convinced of the systemic failure of people’s democracies

4 The quotation occurs in the book Negotiations: 1972-1990 (Deleuze, 1995 /1990Fr: p 173). It comes from a passage in which Deleuze looks back to the writing of MP, and says why the tone of that work is tragic. He speaks of many intellectuals’ having shared in a sense of shame, at not being able to stop the world from being a place of enslavement for so many of its inhabitants. Deleuze’s remark about Cromwell and Napoleon comes from a different source: it occurs in a passage that is upbeat, within the film Abécédaire, by André Boutang – the film shows Deleuze speaking with Claire Parnet in 1988-89. See the section ‘G as in “Gauche” (Left)’ in (Stivale, 2003).
to its character. Still, that knowledge gave scant comfort to the leftists who were struggling, from mid-century on, to square their Marxist worldview with the emerging pictures of what people went through under the rule of a Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot.

What is more, an international socialist movement no longer existed due to a series of rifts, with the Stalinist/Trotskyist schism having dealt the coup de grâce. The last statement of the Comintern gave official blessing to the rise of autonomous nationalist movements for communism; these were later to turn into warring nationalist movements. The left was split by the Sino-Soviet standoff from the late 1950s onward, and the split later deepened with nationalist conflict in South-East Asia. The self-inflicted wounds bled the Marxist left worldwide.

The left also bore – or enjoyed – its share of the social conflict over the new freedoms that blossomed in the early 1960s. Those were the years of the sexual revolution and newfound easy access to recreational drugs, a heady mix. ‘The young ones’ rebelled against the stuffiness and hypocrisy of their parents’ generation, or at least that was part of the story. The cross-currents of affect left their mark most clearly in art – notably in the work of the beat generation writers, and in the postwar French-American phenomenon of French New Wave cinema.

The rebellious ones and the drop-outs stood out as the discontents of the West’s post World War II boom economy. They developed a loose-knit counter-culture, which included activists working on anti-nuclear, peace, and green campaigns. If there was a hedonistic and self-centred streak in some of these people, it was not simply because they were part of an affluent society in which the contraceptive pill had arrived and recreational drugs were easy to get. It was also because a clear threat of nuclear devastation hung over the planet, and there was no knowing how soon life would end. The immense shadow comes through in some of the movies from those years, notably Alain Resnais’ Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959), Stanley Kramer’s On the beach (1959), Federico Fellini’s La dolce vita (1960), and Stanley Kubrick’s Dr Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964).

To put it another way, in the midst of the economic boom that came from postwar reconstruction, there was a community of souls that imagined itself in the scene Walter

5 The mid to late nineties were to provide fresh insights into the failings of democratic states – see (Mann, 1999).

6 Benedict Anderson’s book, Imagined Communities (Anderson, 1991 /first edition 1983), was a response to the wounds mentioned here. The book begins as a meditation on the warring, then opens out to an inquiry into the forces that splintered international socialism on nationalist lines. Anderson finds that the relevant forces dwell in language and literature.

7 Apropos of social change in the sixties, it would be remiss of me to leave out the Vatican II reforms, which were based on a mid-sixties vision that the Roman Catholic Church could be more responsive to the people who now formed its congregation. This transformative event in society is a slow tempo passage. Fifteen years were to elapse, before the hit Monty Python comedy, Life of Brian (1979), gave the chorus’s answer to the protagonists who struggled over what would become of the Church after Vatican II. And then, in 2004, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ reaches a largely receptive mass audience, to which it voices the concerns of a not yet vanished pre Vatican II Church.

Benjamin had looked upon in 1940. Recorded time was not a line of progress; instead, it was as if life were tossed in a relentless cyclonic storm. In the midst of affluence, through the hum of economic progress, the peaceniks and the greens felt the stare of the angel of history.

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.9

All the tensions around authority and freedom exacted a toll on the left. From the early 1950s on, there were many leftists who ceased to be among the party faithful, and began a spirited – and vigorously debated – search for new left positions.10

By the end of the seventies, a significant number of the disenchanted had switched over to the new right, which had emerged in the US during the sixties. The US new right created a fresh approach to the fostering of ‘American values.’ Chief among those values were: self-reliance of families; reward for effort; a liking for commerce; respect for the nuclear-family unit; a wariness of governments, on the grounds that they will steal the freedom of people they govern; and a set against liberals, ie against left-liberals (the new right brought in the phrase ‘the L word; and one of the new right’s achievements was the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution). The thinkers and public policy analysts who became advocates for American values were also called the radical right, or neo-

10 Foucault’s was one of the notable early postwar resignations from the French Communist Party: he tore up his party membership card in 1952 (Coté, 2003). Several members of the British Marxist historians’ group, including E P Thompson, John Saville, and Ralph Miliband, left the British Communist Party when Russia invaded Hungary in 1956. With other dissident leftists, they founded the (British) New Left (Saville, 2003). (Kenny, 1995) and (Anderson, 1980) cover subsequent internal falling out among those involved: there was an ongoing rift between the (First) New Left and the New Left after it was refounded in the early sixties. Notably, Thompson deplored the Gramscian turn, which put the New Left on a new course as of 1964. Then, in the early to mid seventies, when the New Left became attentive to the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser (which had been highly influential on the left in France in the sixties), Thompson again argued strongly that the New Left was on the wrong track. It has since become clear where the Gramscian turn led. The main signposts were two works: Stuart Hall’s famous 1979 article (Hall, 1983/1979), and then (Hall and Jaques, 1989b). The final stages of the journey were the formation of centrist New Labour, and its victory at the polls in 1997.

The troubled postwar trajectory of the left in (non-Eastern) Continental Europe is dissected in a series of articles in New Left Review between 1985 and 1999. Analysis of the US New Left from its formation in 1963 to the early nineties can be found in (Gosse, 1996), (Klatch, 1999), (Lyons, 1996), and (McMillian and Buhle, 2003).

Of course, as mentioned in note 3 above, there were also major ongoing rifts in Western Marxism that began in the interwar years. (Harman, 1988) provides a Trotskyist account of the left’s trajectory during and after 1968, in North America, France, Czechoslovakia (the legacy of the Prague spring), Italy, Britain, Portugal, Spain, and Greece.
conservatives (though at times they downplay the labels, styling themselves as independent minds that have no shared agenda). It is often said that to belong to the new right is to be a blend of economic radical and social conservative.  

**Twilightenment**

Even after the defections to the new right in the seventies, there was still a miscellany of forces comprising the late twentieth century left (in Western countries). There are different ways in which the miscellany can be portrayed. The approach I adopt here, is to present the left as a mix of political endeavour in two disparate secular traditions. (Of course, numerous finer distinctions can be made within each of those traditions, but those finer distinctions are not important here.)

Thus, one strand of left endeavour in the late twentieth century is *post-humanist*. It is part of a pragmatic tradition that goes back – by way of Italian Renaissance humanism – to Cicero and to Aristotle. Among the traits of a pragmatist, one which is vital for the post-humanist left is *a will to honour rhetoric, treating rhetoric as a valid complement to reason*.

The other strand in late twentieth-century left endeavour is indebted above all to the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France, and beyond them, to Descartes, and to Plato. It is an ongoing humanist strand, and to be more specific, it is *Enlightenment-humanist*. It is noted for seeing trust in reason as the ideal bio-faculty, to the point where trust in reason casts grave suspicion on rhetoric. *Rhetoric is thought to be at its best when it serves the public (an audience) purely as a source of entertainment or beauty – an ornament*. Taking rhetoric beyond the purpose of ornament, shows a desire on the speaker’s or writer’s part to mislead, and a proneness on the part of the audience to be misled. On both counts, it is a mark of social degeneracy.

There are some stray threads, which fit in neither the post-humanist nor the Enlightenment-humanist strands of left endeavour. One such thread is British cultural

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11 (Klatch, 1999) and (Kristol and Kristol, 1999) trace the US new right back to the sixties, when significant numbers of students from conservative families broke with their parents’ politics to build a radical right movement. (Many did so under the banner of Young Americans for Freedom, which was the radical right counterpart to Students for a Democratic Society.) Over the years, neo-conservative discourse found a range of outlets. It had (and still has) a strong presence in the opinion and editorial pages of US broadsheets. Public affairs talk shows and periodicals also played a part. Two mastheads stand out, as new right organs: *Commentary*, whose editor from 1960 to 1995 was Norman Podhorez; and *The Public Interest*, which Irving Kristol founded in 1965 and co-edited for a period just shy of forty years. A recently added venture of the new right is ‘The project for the new American century’ (PNAC), which was set up in 1997 as an educational initiative. It serves to promote neo-conservatives’ work and help give it purpose. The New Citizenship Project (chaired by Irving Kristol’s son, William) founded PNAC.

12 Enlightenment-humanist thought and practice adhere to a Platonist tradition of appealing to higher ethical principles, so that the worthy side of our nature closes the door on base motivations in human affairs. Plato argued for the adoption of noble ethical principles, which were known only to the great minds of the polis. (In contrast, Aristotle’s political logic and rhetoric embraced a broader range of minds, and was pragmatic.) In the modern age, the philosophers – who had precursors going back to late medieval times – held that an enlightened society takes as its higher ethical principles two things: the primacy of reason in human affairs, and the universality of the rights of man. Though theirs was a far cry from Plato’s position, it owed its idealism to Plato. The Enlightenment-humanist tradition springs from there.
Marxism. Another is a mid-century existentialist humanism of the left, as propounded by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre focuses on ‘bad faith’ as a facet of reason; it is through bad faith, he maintains, that we shrug off responsibility and fail to rise to the challenges that our freedom poses for us. In the existentialist view, reason has failed in practice to earn an exalted status among human faculties. Instead of trust in reason, the living of an authentic life is the trait that marks one out as fully human.

For a while, it was widely held by post-humanist leftists that structure acts autonomously to produce effects. One of the effects is the illusion of living in a world where subject/object interaction occurs, when in reality all, or almost all, decisive interaction is object/object. The determining role of structure in human affairs can be summed up in the dictum that language speaks man. Structuralist thinking ranged across multiple fields, from anthropology to sociology, psychoanalysis and art history. The structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser exerted a strong influence within the left, especially in the mid sixties (France) and the early seventies (Britain).

By the early seventies, the structuralist view had begun to give way to a resolutely active post-humanist project. Poststructuralists share with structuralists the view that subjectivity is not, and cannot be, a sound basis for political action. So poststructuralists come up with arguments, constructive proposals, and deeds that do not rest on subjectivity, resting instead on practices. The result is active post-humanist politics.

A key fact about poststructuralist politics is that it puts paid to the structure/subject binary, also known as the structure/agency binary. It achieves that effect by promoting practices of voice, and practices of inscription, which discredit representation and meaning. It works actively to show that practices of voice and practices of inscription cannot split the plane of being asunder, into things and representations of things; the critique of representation draws attention to a relation of mutual presupposition, as I have done in chapter three. With representation thus razed, an inscription or an utterance cannot mean something, which is to say, neither images nor words can have meanings. Meanings do not exist, because the thing that a visual/aural figure purports to mirror – its referent – is already an actively constituent part of the imagined mirroring process. David Cronenberg’s classic film *Videodrome* (1983) provides a cinematic expression of the fusion of signs and things: the protagonist peers at the televised image and, leaning toward the monitor, his face melds with the screen.

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13 (Dworkin, 1997) provides a survey of British cultural Marxism, from the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams in the fifties, through the heyday of British cultural studies, up to the time in the eighties when Prime Minister Thatcher’s reconstruction of ‘the popular’ totally remapped the relevant terrain. British cultural Marxism had cordial relations with post-humanist left thinking and practice, without ever becoming part of the post-humanist left.

14 (Sartre, 1956: pp 86-116).

15 Inscription, or graphism, is the use of marks made on any surface, including marks in the form of maps, images and writing.
The fact that streams of verbiage and other visual/aural figures – streams of signs – are meaningless, by no means renders them powerless. The interplay or clash of systemic practices of inscription/voice has the power to help edge formed matter toward the untoward: it can t(r)ip bodies into, and draw them through, events of passage. That is precisely what chapter two of the thesis was saying – see especially section 2.4, which presented the concept, univocity of being. The events of passage are risky, which gives urgency to the quest for awareness of actual practices of inscription, and practices of voice, in dominant systems of utterance and in tactics of utterance disrupting the dominant. Here, we enter the realm of applied handling of major and minor uses of language (as discussed in chapter two of the thesis). Major and minor uses of language correspond to what William E Connolly sees as concentric structures and ‘ec-centric’ paths in and around language.16

There are two quite well-known sets of political practices that have served to discredit representation and meaning since poststructuralist thinking emerged. The first is Situationist spectacle, as practised in the late sixties.17 The second is the original punk of 1973-1980; punk started with the performing group called the Ramones, and the club named CBGB’s in New York in 1973. It crossed the Northern Atlantic in 1975.18

Punk took over from hippy counter-culture, which was losing its political fire. Punk was influenced by Situationist practices. In fact, British punk developed as a post-Situationist style; it simply did away with the avant-garde elitism, and the falling out between cliques over leadership, that had caused the Situationists to self-destruct by 1972. Both the Situationists and punk artist-performers frequently took (without permission) the inscriptions and sounds emanating from other sources, and put them to deviant, deliberately unpleasant uses. A memorable punk event, and exercise in creative politics, was the Sex Pistols’ spectacular progress by barge on the Thames, in June ’77. Belting out ‘Anarchy in the UK’ (their single), they stole the thunder of the royal jubilee.

Punk in turn was to fade as a political force not long after its ’77 high point. How that came about is discussed later in the present chapter. Nevertheless, certain other poststructuralist practices had emerged at about the same time as punk, and shared punk’s do-it-yourself (DiY) ethos. Those practices – starting with l’area dell’autonomia in Italy in the early seventies – were to play a part in active politics in the nineties, as shown in chapter five below. For now, the point I am making is that both the post-humanist strand of left endeavour and the Enlightenment-humanist strand need to be looked at, in order to trace how the left passed the seventies, eighties and nineties. Based on disparate philosophies, the two strands rubbed one another the wrong way. As a result, the left spent much energy on internal debate and altercations – energy that might otherwise have been channelled outward.

16 (Connolly, 2004: p 187). Film theorist Robert Stam, writing about Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of language and literature, uses the terms ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ to suggest the tension in which major and minor uses of language co-exist (Stam, 2000: p 311).
17 Guy Debord was a major contributor to Situationist thinking and practice; The Society of the Spectacle (Debord, 1995 /1967Fr) continues to be widely read.
18 (Savage, 2001) provides a chronological survey of punk culture, with an emphasis on British punk.
Structural change in economies

There was more to the troubled inner life of the left in Western countries than having to see the clay feet of established socialist regimes, and coming to terms (or not) with free love, the drug scene, healing the planet, counter-culture, and post-humanist thought. From the early 1970s on, finance, trade and industry in the West went through a structural transition that cut a large swathe through the left’s support base. My account of the structural change draws for the most part on sources in the disciplines of political economy and sociology.19

An early sign of the structural change was the rise of a fourth sector of the US economy: the information sector. An economist, Fritz Machlup, drew attention to the growing new sector back in the 1950s. By the early eighties, the change was seen as a move by industrialised national economies out of a form that was based on mass production of goods and services. Economies were shifting into a form shaped by the information sector, a form which called for both firms and workers to become adept in flexible specialisation. Industry, from here on, would thrive on short production runs, responding ever more promptly to changing market conditions.20

Investors and expert workers in the field of communications technology held that the driver of the economic change was ‘convergence.’ They were referring to a merging of two broad sets of processes: computing and communications processes. Within a few more years, convergence came to be known as ‘ICT’ (information and communications technologies), and the mainstream media were abuzz with discussions of how national economies were being reshaped by ICT.21

So far, the tale of the shift into flexible specialisation and ICT-led economic growth may seem innocent of political content – just a bumpy technological cum economic shift. But, as well as taking hold in trade and industry, the structural change showed up in the ways people styled themselves as subjects in their milieux. Consciousness had changed.

Among other things, people were becoming less keen to identify as class subjects. Some experts held that the economies of the West were becoming post-industrial economies, or ‘knowledge economies.’ The industrialised economies were doomed to decline, it was said, if they did not become knowledge economies. A knowledge economy is one where a substantial and growing part of national income comes from work that proceeds on a basis of

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20 Machlup’s The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States (1962) led to other scholars pursuing the subject of structural change. An influential book that took up Machlup’s theme was Daniel Bell’s The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (1973). Other books that spread the word were Alain Touraine’s The Post-Industrial Society (1974), and Marc Porat’s The Information Economy: Definition and Measurement (1977). The work that put flexible specialisation on the map was Michael Piore and Charles Sabel’s The Second Industrial Divide (1984).

21 James Beniger (Beniger, 1986) was the first writer to draw attention to IT and communications convergence as part of the unfolding of industrial history. Beniger’s chs 1 and 10 discuss convergence/ICT, though at the time the book was written there was no settled name for the development.
mastery in the use of symbols – such work has come to be called ‘immaterial labour’. The increase in economic reliance on immaterial labour, as opposed to old style material labour, was one of several factors behind the blurring of the line of division in class struggle. Of course, underpinning the new classless societies was the evolving system of international trade and finance. The new postindustrial tier of countries were the holders of poverty-stricken Third World countries’ debt. In that debt-holder role, the postindustrial tier of countries could, and did, demand cheap access to resources, including good old-style (‘material’) labour. Thus, the new classless economies and societies were locked in an unlovely embrace with material labour, even if they closed their eyes to it. What had changed for those societies was that circumstances now permitted the sourcing of greater amounts of that kind of labour off-shore, in a buyers’ market.

The structural change also showed up as a shift in accepted wisdom on how governments interact with finance, industry, and the citizenry. Likewise, views were changing on how political parties interact with their supporters. There was a shifting of sentiment in favour of individuals’ asserting their will, and against submitting to discipline from on high for the sake of any imagined common good. So the parties of the left, if they were to have a future, would have to move away from the bureaucratic collectivism and authoritarian mode of organisation that were their trademarks. They would have to shed their stiff and stodgy, phallogocentric, partyocrat ways.

Fordist/postfordist transition

The work of Michel Aglietta and others showed that the structural change was in fact a sequel to a politico-economic crisis. The crisis had arisen in the international regime of finance, trade, production and distribution that formed part of the settlement after World War

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22 The ‘death of class’ in Britain and Western Europe – understood as working-class people’s growing estrangement from politics – has been discussed in sociology since the mid 1960s. (Barry Hindess’s book on the subject, (Hindess, 1971), provides references to other scholars’ earlier work in a similar vein, including a 1965 journal article by Sebastian Herkommer in International Socialism Journal). In (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) the authors conclude that, whilst working class is no longer a salient category, social inequality and conflict are here to stay. They argue that social inequality and conflict should be addressed in the form that they now take, viz. the disadvantage of the new, symbolically-identified underclass (ethnic, migrant, welfare-dependent, deprived of capacity to consume, immersed in a culture of poverty).

23 I have previously mentioned (section 1.3) French intellectuals’ and students’ disenchantment with the French communist party in the sixties and seventies. In Britain, the sixties and early seventies were noted for the success of unofficial strikes: Eric Hobsbawm wrote about the inability of British trade unions to keep workers in line, especially during the early seventies (Hobsbawm, 1984/1979). In Italy, from the ‘hot autumn’ of 1968 onward, many workers organised themselves on the shop floor, and would not follow instructions from union leaders. They also rejected the Italian communist party’s strategy of pursuing a pact with the governing Christian Democrat party, a pact that involved agreement to massive industry restructuring. The extraparliamentary left party, Lotta Continua, dissolved itself at its annual conference in 1976 over the issue of respect for its different constituents’ autonomy – notably, the autonomy of women – in the struggles to shape the future. In February 1977, when massed rebels were occupying the Rome University campus, the Communist Party sent a union leader to talk with the rebels. He was held up to ridicule, with the insurgents satirising him in effigy to show just what they thought of his mission (Berardi, 1980).
II, a regime known as the ‘fordist’ system. (The term comes from Gramsci’s notes on ‘Americanism and Fordism.’) By the late 1960s, the fordist system was not meeting its aim – it was meant to keep national economies on stable growth paths, avoiding the stress in economic relations between states that had marked the interwar years.

The fordist system could not have come into its own, as it did for a time after World War II, were it not for an historic compromise that was forged between capital, labour unions, and major political parties. Under the terms of the compact, pay rises would be linked to gains in productivity, and unions would accept the right of management to manage without having to consult and negotiate with workers. Constitutional government of states would be upheld, with no union-backed campaigns by workers to achieve political ends; and government would fulfil a clearly demarcated role. The compact was sealed at the national level, but it had an international basis; it was part of what is sometimes called the Pax Americana.

In the fordist system’s heyday, there were tripartite national accords that fixed the course of wages, working conditions, and social security.\(^{24}\) It was widely held that for the economy to prosper, business had to be scrupulous in managing changes to production technology. The changes had to be engineered – that is to say, they had to be systems engineered and human-factors engineered – subject to a wage/surplus distributive constraint. The constraint was that workers’ pay must be sufficient for workers to buy the mass-market consumer goods the system was making.

The fordist system began to unravel in the late sixties when some groups of workers, especially in the US, found that their jobs on production lines had become more alienating than they had bargained for. There were rises in absenteeism, and other lapses from work performance standards. The standards, based on Taylorist time and motion studies, were what investors had banked on.

The productivity lapses were smallest in Japan and Germany, countries whose cultures for the provision of finance, and for the handling of labour relations, gave rise to workplaces that did not alienate workers. That differential had a crucial effect. It pushed the US into trade imbalance, and that seemed to trap the US economy in stagnation. As a means of reducing the imbalance and stimulating the economy, President Nixon removed the US dollar from the gold standard in 1971.

The floating of the US dollar put an end to the Bretton Woods system of currency alignment, as other countries followed suit and floated their currencies, trying to shore up their economies. Stagflation meant that there were few openings for new productive investment, and hence capital was readily available for speculative plays – it was footloose.

\(^{24}\) Tripartite social pacts covering various issues had a history going back to the years just after World War I. They arose as a means of reforming the capitalist system, so as to shield the system from rebellious shop-floor workers’ organisations that were bent on overthrowing it. The militants had deep moral objections to the system that had sent huge numbers of workers to kill each other under horrendous conditions, so that war profits could accumulate. The early tripartite accords soon came undone, when governments and employers, in the fight against inflation during the 1920s, walked away from concessions they had made to unions in the immediate aftermath of the war. (Sweden was exceptional in that it had a positive experience with accords, from the early 1930s on.)
And thanks to new computing and communication systems, which helped new financial instruments to be brought into use, capital could increasingly switch at short notice out of one investment and on to the next. The edgier markets for corporate control and for commercial debt promised gains for players who held that looking out for yourself was your first duty. So it was that corporate takeovers boomed, redundancies became the order of the day, mutuals were demutualised, and governments held sweeping sell-offs of state owned entities.

Easily shifted capital meant that peak bodies in industry and government lost much of their power. Notably, mobile capital wiped out the peak bodies’ power to create tripartite national accords – or so it seemed, until events of the late 1990s cast doubt on that assertion.25

Much of organised labour was cowed, seeing what happened to groups of unionised workers that were singled out in ‘show’ campaigns of union-breaking. States wielded their power against the workers that were involved in those clashes. The fate of the British coalminers was crushing defeat, and the same applied to the US air traffic controllers, and Australia’s airline pilots. Overall trade union influence and membership waned. Job security was soon a privilege enjoyed by dwindling numbers of employees. Work was increasingly casualised and outsourced, with workers’ rights losing protections they once had under the law. Rates of pay and working conditions varied over a larger range than before.26

The wage/surplus distributive constraint, within which changes to production technology had been managed in the fordist system, was also a casualty of the structural change. It did not matter any more whether workers’ pay enabled them to consume what their labour went into making, because of the freeing up of flows of goods and services, and finance, across national borders. There were rounds of multilateral trade negotiations, in which states gave foreign corporations the same market access as resident ones, in sector after sector of the domestic market for goods and services. States were also looking at relaxing controls on direct foreign investment. Newly industrialising countries were using export processing zones as a lure for capital: these are zones where firms can operate with a great deal of licence as to their impact on the environment, plant safety, and workers’ lives.

25 (Bell, 1997) spells out, in the Australian context, how mobile capital wiped out peak bodies’ power to create tripartite national accords. The power in question, of course, had already come under threat to some degree from another quarter, the shop floor (see note 23 above).

Explanations of the kind given by Bell are artefacts of ideology, and once that is exposed, national accords can still work, where there is a will. Thus, national policies flouting the discipline of mobile capital have worked, for certain countries, as of the late 1990s; the prime example is Malaysia (Saul, 2004). Saul mentions French President Giscard d’Estaing’s televised address to the people, back in 1974. That act marked the onset of a ‘mania for public declarations of impotence by democratically elected leaders. Globalisation became their excuse for not dealing with difficult issues, for not using their levers of power and larger budgets to effect. They made the force of inevitability credible’.

26 See (Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, 1999) and references therein, among them (Brenner, 1998), (Edwards, 1979), (Elliott and Atkinson, 1998), (Harrison, 1994), (Hirst and Thompson, 1996), (Johnson, 1995), (Mishel et al., 1997), and (Peetz, 1997). A more recent source on slippages in workers’ rights is (McCallum, 2000). Of course, the main avenue for reducing workers’ rights is the movement of work ‘off-shore’ to places where rights have yet to win legal protection.
4.3 Premature capitulations

Punk fade-out

As I noted earlier, in giving punk as an instance of poststructuralist practices, punk had a DiY ethos. The audience/performer divide was barely there. Fans were performers; at the very least, fans made the gigs and the culture around the gigs, by dressing the part. Also, groups of punks who attended a gig or two put on by punk performers, would likely as not form their own bands and start doing their own gigs. They’d create their own punk looks, make up their own songs, circulate their own fanzines through underground presses, and record their music with small independent recording companies.

Punks despised hippies. They loathed them for having surrendered beat and hippy culture to a process of commodification. The activists who had fashioned the hippy culture, and whose lives and bodies had gone into its making, had thus lost their autonomy and become part of the self-valorisation of capital, whereas punks were defying that process. Large companies in the entertainment and allied industries had given jobs to former hippies, who were in charge of the selling of music and lifestyle trappings to young people. Hippies had put down roots in Cogville; punks saw that, and acted out the message that it was better to be nothing at all, than to become part of the capitalist machine as the hippies had done.

In time, however, punk was edged out of the main youth music scene by other styles, which did not share punk’s tendency to define itself via an urge never to sell out. Video technology served as a catalyst in the sidelining of punk.

Punks had used short video clips both as agitprop and as a means to promote their music. In contrast, for other genres of youth music in the seventies – notably heavy metal and glam rock (eg the group Queen) – video clips were purely a promotional device. When the music video free-to-air channel, MTV, started up in 1981, the channel soon became immensely popular. Music videos became the prime vehicle for the marketing of music to youth. And not only music: the new televisual/filmic language of music videos became the dominant language in all marketing of products to youth.

MTV’s success drew professional visual designers, and some of the most talented directors fresh out of film school, into the making of music videos/advertises. Increasingly, bands looking to give their music an edge over the competition turned to experts in visual design and in marketing and public relations. The experts were professionals working in the large or ‘hot’ companies in the music industry. (The self-made star Madonna was no exception to the trend. She sold out, in that she built up and headed a monster company whose business was to merchandise her work and the styles she invented. But at least she got to pocket the profits herself.)

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27 The term ‘self-valorisation’ is from Marx’s Capital, Volume I – see ‘Social machine three: the civilised capitalist machine’ in ch 3 above.
Punk did not survive the commercial onslaught. It went underground, as anarcho-punk, forced to the fringe by new genres of youth music, some band-oriented and others disco. Air-time and venues for bands were taken up with eighties new wave and with past-its-prime heavy metal hard rock,\(^{28}\) then with glam rock, college and garage rock, and in the nineties grunge and postpunk alternative rock. The last was inspired in part by punk (it drew on punk and college rock), but, unlike punk, it was apolitical and it thrived on being merchandised.

To sum up, in the second half of the seventies, punk had propelled the Situationists’ radical avant-garde practices into mass youth culture. Punk had created a commons for cultural production, a cultural tilth to be worked by collectives in self-sufficient (DiY) mode. Then MTV helped capital to bring about the enclosure of the commons, and punk was eclipsed by genres of band and disco music that were easily commodified.

**Neoliberals take over the major-party machinery**

To paraphrase one of the Sex Pistols’ album titles, never mind the punks. The breakdown of the fordist system in the late sixties should have been good news for the left. The Keynesian fix had pulled the capitalist economies out of the crisis of the Great Depression. Thirty years on, the fix was no longer working: it had delivered capitalism into a new crisis.

But the social democratic and Eurocommunist left did not – perhaps because it/they could not – seize the moment. Left organisers were loath to write off the historic compromise, in which workers were meant do what union officials told them to do, and in return for that, union leaders got a say in the sharing out of material gains from new plant and work practices. In some countries, left strategists may have reasoned that if the left killed off the ailing historic compromise and opted for a non-capitalist future, then there would be a right wing *coup d’état*. Events in Latin America, above all Chile, had a demonstration effect.\(^{29}\) First, international finance was withheld from the Allende government; then, there was the coup of September 1973. No clearer warning could have been sent to socialist parties in other countries seeking a way out of the crisis-ridden capitalist system.\(^{30}\)

When the historic compromise of fordist fell apart, therefore, the event plunged the left (along with capitalism) into crisis. President Nixon’s floating of the dollar set loose the forces, both economic and political, that would build a postfordist world dis/order. The new right then had the genius to see how to ride those forces. Thus, Thatcher tapped

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28 Rob Reiner’s hit mockumentary movie, *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), provides an acerbic view of the aging heavy metal hard rock bands that took over from punk.

29 There were military coups in Brazil (1964), Bolivia (1971), Uruguay (1972), Chile (1973), and Argentina (1976).

30 The argument is developed in (Przeworski, 1980). Shortly after the coup in Chile, the then leader of the Italian Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer, wrote three articles, which were published in the party magazine *Rinascita*: ‘Reflections on Italy,’ ‘After the Facts of Chile’ and ‘After the Coup.’ The articles argued for a coalition between the Communists and the Christian Democrats to bring political stability to the nation, for the good of the economy and to avert a possible right-wing coup in Italy.
into a buried vein of dissatisfaction running through those who were ministered to by union and public sector bureaucracies. She saw that setting up flatter structures of organisation, and creating service arrangements with a choice of supplier, along with some demonising of the unions, would win wide approval. The protests of those who had been ensconced in the hierarchies would be supported by the left-liberals or ‘wets;’ but that whining would do her cause no harm.

The quickest people to recognise the genius of Thatcher were the thinkers who converted from social democracy to the new right in the early Thatcher-Reagan years. In time, strategists who had not deserted the left developed something of a sneaking admiration for the new right. The admiration may have been tinged with envy of the new right’s vote-pulling power. Added to that, if the memorable cartoons showing Thatcher as a punisher are any guide, the new right tweaked the inner sado-masochist of its reluctant admirers on the left.

So it was that politicians Douglas and Longe and their advisers in New Zealand, then the Keating/Hawke team in Australia, and in the late eighties and early nineties the thinkers who shaped Blair’s New Labour and Clinton’s policies, broke with the social democratic left. The new right’s admirers and imitators on the left came to be known as neoliberals, though that term never caught on in the US, perhaps because ‘liberal’ in US parlance means left-liberal. (Also, since the Reagan era, it has had wide currency as a term of abuse – as noted earlier in this chapter, it is the original L word.)

The left’s break-up was momentous in that the neoliberals won control of the major-party machinery; no level was exempt, from local branches through to the Socialist International. Thus, the social democratic left lost control of the party machinery that it had built, or, in the case of the US, the party machinery that had been helpful to it for over half a century, since the New Deal era.

That machinery, in the hands of the neoliberals, could and did unseat the right. The neoliberals could now claim the postfordist era as their own – at least for a decade or so. Keen pragmatists that they were, they would build an edifice of their own based on the new right’s insights. They saw their project as a ‘new politics’ that would be ‘beyond Left and Right,’ even though it may ‘not amount to much more than a slightly cleaned-up, humanised version of that of the radical Right.’ The centrist project was launched.

**From social movements to culture wars**

Among the problems that beset the left from the fifties through to the early nineties, one that I need to dissect further is the rebellion against authority in the name of liberation. Or,

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31 (Bell, 1997) provides an account of the Australasian phase of the left’s adoption of new right policies. The experiment had positive results electorally in the 1980s and early nineties, a fact that was not lost on strategists for the British Labour Party especially.

32 (Hall and Jaques, 1989a: p 16).
as in the title of Ernesto Laclau’s book, *Emancipation(s).* The aspect that I now bring into focus is how New Social Movements turned into identity politics.

The term ‘New Social Movements,’ or ‘NSMs,’ comes from the sociology literature. Scholars based in the US and in Italy have led the empirical and theoretical work that has been done on NSMs, since the movements were first taken up as an object of study in 1980. NSMs included the civil rights movement in the US; black nationalism, black power, and black pride; the first nations movement; the second wave of feminism; the anti-nuclear movement; the peace movement; gay pride; the health and welfare rights movement; and not least, the movement supporting, in all their diversity, living systems’ and subsystems’ rights to continue asserting their difference (in other words the green movement, supporting biosociodiversity).

In the academic literature on NSMs, scholars for the most part have set out to describe and explain NSMs within a scientific paradigm. One factor found to be contributing to NSMs was the widening of access to resources, or inputs, that are relevant for perceiving patterns of social injustice and for acting in concert to remove the injustice. The advent of cheap air travel and telecommunication services was important in that regard. Other factors included: the growing hold (in the West) of secular and liberal values, as opposed to conservatively based religious values; the opening up of social and political opportunities, due to the old bastions of power facing increased media scrutiny, and also needing to look to their own survival at a time of structural change in national economies; and changes in population characteristics, such as people’s own and parental income and education levels, and workforce and employment status.

Functioning alongside the NSMs, and to some degree hand in hand with them, were transnational advocacy networks (‘TANs’). Non-government organisations reached out to work for causes that mattered – albeit in non-identical ways – to constituencies in countries of both the First World and the Third World. Factors behind the growth of TANs were: cheaper air travel; student exchange programs; refugees’ being known to, and assisted by, church groups and concerned individuals in Western countries; political exiles from Latin America teaching in US and European universities; the US Peace Corps; and lay missionary programs. The effect of TANs has been described as ‘the creation of a new kind of global public (or civil society), which grew as a cultural legacy of the 1960s.’

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33 (Laclau, 1996).
34 (Melucci, 1980) is the publication that marks the beginning of the study of NSMs.
35 The French sociologist Alain Touraine wrote an early critique of the detached scientific approach to the study of NSMs, and proposed instead a reflexive approach (Touraine, 1981 /1978Fr). But as a general rule, studies of NSMs maintain the conventions of science. For some signs that the general rule may have begun to break down, so that the role of affect in NSMs can show through in scholarly accounts, see Ronald Aminzade’s survey of the literature on NSMs (Aminzade et al., 2001).
36 In outlining the major findings on NSMs and related activist conduct, I have drawn on (Melucci, 1980) and (Melucci, 1996); (Offe, 1985); (Tarrow, 1992); and (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). It is in the last mentioned, at p 14, that the quotation about a new kind of global public is found.
The activists taking part in NSMs targeted certain patterns of injustice they wanted to sweep away, knowing that it was a difficult task. The patterns were embedded in mainstream culture, in everyday language, and hence in common sense. It was difficult to escape unjust treatment, for subjects whose place was off-centre in the prevailing religious and secular-humanist worldviews. The remedy was to alter those worldviews, to alter common sense itself.

Suppose you were in a marginalised group – you might be a girl or woman, non-white, an immigrant, or a differently (l)ab(el)led form of life. You might be a sometime recipient of unemployment or sickness benefits. You might be made of bent economic timber and ‘falling down,’ proving yourself a dud as a provider and consumer. Your sexuality might be less than completely straight. You might have a first nations background. You might be of Irish descent, or Southern European, or Asian.

Humanists would argue that in your makeup there is a kind of redeeming strand, viz the common humanity, around which your atypical particular traits are entwined. The humanist argument comes from the brain of mainstream society, the ‘normal’ brain, and it says, in effect: ‘Oh, it’s a shame you’re marginalised. Come to us and we’ll accept you as an honorary member of the mainstream. We’re all the same under the skin. What unites us is deeper than what divides us.’ It’s the offensiveness of that line of argument that NSMs exposed. NSMs worked to create a world where your peculiarity would be treated on a par with the peculiarity of the chaps who are male, of North-European descent, ‘able’, straight, and made of the right economic stuff.

In sum, NSMs rallied people to work toward the parity of oddities. It was a Sisyphean task, but it was useful in as much as it decentred the field of subjectivity. The positive affect that the work channelled was substantial, as some of the popular songs from the seventies attest (a prime example is the anthem, sung by Helen Reddy, ‘I am woman’). When formerly marginalised subjects, of every hue in the rainbow, were put on a par with the mainstream, it validated diverse identities. And so, among the various things NSMs did, one was to launch identity politics.

Part of the task at hand was to expose the ways in which static order – always hand in glove with repression and injustice – invests language. At their best, NSMs actively countered, rather than reacting against, the language-borne aspect of injustice. Often with wit, rather than by preaching, NSM activists laid siege to everyday verbal and non-verbal language. They made light of the high/low cultural divide, and paid special attention to the codes of verbal and visual representation used in popular media. Some conservative commentators and scholars were affronted, and spoke out in defence of mainstream standards. Thus, the culture wars got under way.

Other foci of NSM work were the systems languages of fields such as architecture, urban and regional planning, and economic development. In such fields NSMs sometimes won the mainstreaming of their concerns: participating agencies had their programs and documents broken down into the smallest of parts, and the common sense element was re-engineered at that micro level. The aim of such mainstreaming was to alter the inbuilt assumptions as to
how power was deployed. (Gender mainstreaming and differently-abled mainstreaming are examples.)

The trouble with identity politics

Identity politics was reviled by the old right and the new right. NSMs stood accused of two misdemeanours, or sins. First, there was the sin of political correctness: NSMs foisted ‘unnatural’ codes of representation on a populace that was quite at home with the existing natural codes. Second, there was the sin of fostering a victim mentality and a culture of complaint. As part of the second charge, the taunt ‘loser’ made its way into everyday language. (No matter that the ‘losers’ had in fact won their way out of subordinate positions. As victors, they exercised the right to claim some kind of redress, from people that had actively or passively profited out of the now defunct relationship of the ‘normal’ to the supposedly lesser powers in life.)

Identity politics was also criticised by a sizable segment of left, and with stronger cause. The left critique was that activists who worked on identity politics were paying too much attention to their own image, as portrayed in the popular media. The identity warriors stood accused, if not of narcissistic behaviour, then of being fixated on symbols to the neglect of substance. The left critics charged the identity warriors with being lukewarm on the issue of redistributing surplus from capital to labour, and with not putting up a fight against the capitalist system. (To give the left critics their due, they lent no support to the right’s jibes at demands for equal opportunity, affirmative action, and symbolic recognition. The left sought not to alienate people who were active in the NSMs. Therefore the left critics of identity politics did not claim, as did commentators on the right, that women’s and minorities’ grievances were bogus. Nor did they join in diatribes from both the right and the centrists about a cult of the victim.)

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37 With regard to terms used in the culture wars, Robert Hughes’s book, The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America (Hughes, 1993) popularised the phrase ‘culture of complaint’. The term ‘politically correct’ (PC) entered the language as a light-hearted jibe that was used within the left in the when the New Social Movements were yet young. When somebody lapsed, in an unguarded moment, into some pattern of speech or behaviour that pre-dated the NSMs, he was apt to be chided for failing to be PC. (For example, he might have implied that women have a subsidiary role, or he might have done less than his utmost to save the planet.) Subsequently, the right sounded the alarm that there was a serious campaign by leftists, through NSMs, to foist new patterns of speech and behaviour on society at large.

In the mid 1990s, the culture wars segued into the science wars. (The Sokal hoax was the defining moment. Alan Sokal, a physicist, wrote an article parodying poststructuralist science; he succeeded in getting it published as a serious article in the Spring 1996 issue of Social Text.) After the science wars came the history wars. The culture/science/history wars were fought tooth and nail – mostly in US intellectual circles, with ripple effects elsewhere.

38 Centrist discourse on victims is summed up in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s sound bite, ‘We will give the disadvantaged a hand up, not a hand-out.’ Justifications for stamping out ‘victim culture’ were to be found in the writings of well known commentators, such as Hughes, who condemned ethnic and women’s victim culture, and Camille Paglia, who condemned women’s victim culture.
By the mid nineties, harder evidence had emerged of the shortfalls in identity politics from a left standpoint, and it emerged from the postfordist economy and society. Large numbers of the identity warriors themselves woke up to the blunder they had made, and they changed course – or reverted to the original path of the NSMs in the eighties before the onset of identity politics. The classic account of the identity warriors’ awakening to their error was published almost a decade after the event, in a book by one of the ‘penitent’ identity warriors, the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein.39

In brief, the identity warriors had erred in that they unwittingly set up a grand banquet for corporate investors in a certain type of business firm. The firms were of the kind that brand-manages lines of apparel, personal gadgetry and other lifestyle items – lines such as Nike and Reebok sportswear, the Gap and Old Navy fashion wear, Borders bookstores, Starbucks coffee lounges, brand-name mobile phone and internet services, and so forth. The corporate brand-managers noticed the flow of affect that identity politics helped to keep in motion, and they found a way of harnessing that flow as a commercial resource. Thus, the identity warriors were playing into the hands of the rapacious brand-manager firms.

This is how firms tapped into identity politics for profit. At home – in the US, Canada, and Britain – the firms sent scouts into marginalised groups in search of cultural capital created by those groups: the scouts were looking for the next hip styles of moving, watching, dressing, speaking, and making music. For a modest outlay, the firms affixed their brands to that cultural capital, and charged consumers for the mark of the brand; consumers were coached and coaxed via the media to see particular brands as a means of asserting their quasi-tribal identity. Meanwhile – and this tended to happen abroad, with the goods being made under contract in Third world countries, often in Export Processing Zones – the brand-manager firms exploited labour. They shifted assembly work offshore, and where the work consisted in services that could not be shifted, they reorganised it into ‘McJobs.’ They showed minimal concern for people’s rights to a safe workplace or to a social environment where the worker could muster some dignity on a basic personal level.40

Leftist writers more gently rebuked the identity warriors, reminding them of the importance, in Enlightenment values, of universalism – either as opposed to, or complementing, recognition of difference ((Barry, 2001), (Callinicos, 2003: pp 112-114)). As a retrospective of the British journal *New Left Review* (NLR) puts it ((Blackburn, 2000), italics added here):

The varieties of Marxism and socialism [NLR] espoused in [1985-1990] and earlier periods had the general effect of distancing NLR from the populism, relativism and identity politics found in the broader New Left and post-New Left milieu. In NLR 178 Sabina Lovibond argued that classical enlightenment universalism retained a definite value for feminists as well as socialists.

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek develops a Marxist critique of identity politics, without simply taking Enlightenment values for granted (Žižek, 1999: ch 4). Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau respond to Žižek’s views on identity politics, among other things, in the extended debate that forms (Butler et al., 2000). Nowhere in these leftist critical inspections of identity politics is there any snide talk of victim culture.

39  (Klein, 2001: ch 5). That chapter is where Klein gives her account, with hindsight, of the events in the early nineties, when the identity warriors came to see that they had blundered.

40  The flow of affect that identity politics helps to circulate is known in the vernacular as ‘cool’ (used as a noun). Chs 1 through 11 of Klein’s *No Logo* (op. cit.), provide a lucid, fact-filled and well referenced account of the entire chain of commerce in cool, ie the vein of business that identity politics helped to open up.
Though many identity warriors shifted into less reactive forms of dissenting politics in the early nineties, that only became widely known around the turn of the century. There was no clear overall end to hostilities; identity politics just petered out, and so did the culture wars. The fresh start that the NSMs made took some time to have an impact.

4.4 A matter of differential impact

The left, then, had suffered a threefold calamity. First, there was the punk fade-out. Second, there was the break-up in which the neoliberals took the major-party machinery from the social democratic left, and in so doing, capitulated to the right. Third, identity politics had been subsumed in a more potent set of forces, which sucked wealth out of workers and consumers and fed it into the wallets of investors in brand-manager businesses thriving on the use of media.

And yet, the triple pummelling did not spell the ruin of the left. One way of seeing why that is so, is to think about the impact in terms of a pruning back, or a cull, that had a differential impact across the range of forces comprising the late twentieth-century left (in Western countries). As in section 4.2 above, I deal with that range of forces by dividing it into two contrasting strands: post-humanist, and Enlightenment-humanist (which I shorten to ‘humanist’, in the thesis from this point on).

The humanist strand had sustained the greater part of the damage that was done by the three setbacks for left endeavour. For longer than a lifetime, the humanist left – except for the anarchist fringe – had embraced a strategy in which the left would use major-party machinery to run the state, or at least to get a say in the running of the state. As of the nineties, there was scant hope of the left winning back control of the major-party machinery from the neoliberals; and building a new major party was not a promising option, given the trend of major party decline. The humanist left was therefore bereft of a strategy. It was also unaccustomed to thinking about how forces might function to good effect in a strategy-free zone. Added to that, the humanist left’s idea of the universality of human rights bordered on a wish that the politics of difference would go away. That attitude drove a wedge between humanists and the growing number of people on the left who were bent on celebrating difference.

In contrast, the pragmatic part of the left, which is to say, the post-humanist left, had no qualms about the left’s entering a strategy vacuum. From the sixties onward, the work of
Deleuze – and the work of some other post-humanist thinkers, notably Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard – had suggested that it may be a good thing to do away with strategy (and leadership with it). The post-humanists had also produced a critique of universality, noting that where universality is a goal, subjugated groups tend to take hold, and there is scant hope of subject-groups forming.\textsuperscript{41}

Post-humanists were averse to strategy because, among other things, they shared with the existentialists a weakened faith in reason. They could no longer grant primacy to reason, due to the anguish, merged with shame, with which they viewed late modern history. First, there had been an era of expansion across the world by the imperialist powers. Then, in wartime, a logic of sheer indifference to the suffering of the people – not just the people on the opposing side, but also co-nationals across the class divide – had emerged. That logic was linked with a cult of technological prowess, and with profiteering. The three elements had formed a monstrous trinity that prevailed across the board.\textsuperscript{42} In the wake of all that, post-humanists were drawn to practices and studies that were deeply at odds with the Enlightenment project. Post-humanists built on the writings of Spinoza, Sade, Nietzsche, and Freud, among others.

Todd May has described how Deleuze (also Foucault and Lyotard) contributed to the post-humanist project.\textsuperscript{43} Their work led them to suggest a politics of trying out practices. They set about showing by example how to find experiments that are worth doing, and how to evaluate the outcomes. The approaches that they developed are pragmatic. Their approaches are also \textit{empiricist} in the sense that the approaches make use of experiments. (The method is empiricist, but it is non-scientific because it makes experimenters immanent in their experiments. In science, the experimenter transcends the material she treats in the experiment.)

The post-humanist project is not anti-humanist. Rather, it disrupts humanist endeavour, and tempers it, by throwing up at critical points alternatives to it that may turn out to be both good and compelling. An evaluative process is needed, to guard

\textsuperscript{41} Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of universality is conveyed in ch 2 of the present thesis, see especially section \textsuperscript{2.4}.

\textsuperscript{42} There is little doubt that, had the victors lost, their leaders would have been tried for the following war crimes: the vengeance visited on ordinary Germans by Russian troops; the fire-bombing of cities in Japan and Germany as the war drew to a close; and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

\textsuperscript{43} (May, 1994). May said that Deleuze, Foucault and Lyotard were authors of a ‘poststructuralist anarchist’ project, now and then shortening the descriptor to ‘new anarchist’. I avoid using either of those terms for the project of Deleuze, Foucault and Lyotard as outlined by May. Anarchist writers and activists now use the term ‘new anarchism’ in a different sense. I am thinking of David Graeber’s 2002 article in \textit{New Left Review}, titled ‘The New Anarchists.’

Graeber comments on how the large historical episodes of the last century gave rise to a worldwide resurgence of anarchism in the nineties, after its having been pushed all but out of sight for a stretch of seventy or so years (Graeber, 2002: pp 68-70). He also describes the new – or ‘small-a’ – anarchists’ system of coordination, but he sets aside the question of how the system came about. Graeber is most familiar with the small-a crowd based in the US. Members of that circle rarely comment on philosophy, but when they do, they tend to speak up for Enlightenment values and decry existentialist as well as poststructuralist thought. ((Grubacic, 2003), for instance, quotes Noam Chomsky to that effect.) Still, there is a close fit between, on the one hand, the small-a anarchists’ system of coordination, and on the other, the work of poststructuralist thinkers on how to build a left that embodies its own values. A left whose values are immanent is a left that thrives without authority and repression, and rids itself of both inward- and outward-directed \textit{ressentiment}.

against the uptake of bad alternatives. Thinkers in the Frankfurt school, notably Nancy Fraser and Jürgen Habermas, take issue with Foucault, saying that he does not show the evaluative process at work, or does not show it adequately. That charge cannot be made against Deleuze, who proposed, and gave effect to, a schema for partaking in, and evaluating, uses of power.44

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the various problems that beset the left in the West, from the fifties onward, until in the early nineties an impression began to emerge of the entire left as a spent force. Among those problems was a decline in support for major parties, coupled with a loss of class identification as national economies altered in the patterns of work they offered for job holders and job seekers. Also, Western communist parties, social democratic parties, and left splinter parties were at loggerheads with each other over a range of things. The main sticking points were these: whether to condemn or excuse actually existing socialism; whether to go along with hierarchy as an organising device in the struggle against capitalism or let the struggle have looser structures; and whether to compromise with, or dare to confront, state power in constitutional democracies upholding capitalism.

The problems mentioned weighed heavily on the humanist left, but they were less of a problem for the pragmatic, post-humanist left. Thus, the stage was being set for a manifestation of post-humanist practices and thinking, left-of-centre. That event, which began in the nineties, takes us into chapter five.

44 See ch 3 of the thesis, note 21 on p 51.