IS SOCIALISM A CREDIBLE OBJECTIVE?

An important book has been written by David Selbourne: “Against Socialist Illusion” (Macmillan, London 1985) which outlines the view that socialism is an impractical and illusory objective. In other words, the aim of socialism is supported by an intellectual elite and the majority of the population of most societies are indifferent concerning the attempt to realise this approach. He comments that: “Likewise the Left, in its cloud of unknowing, is prevented from seeing that existing forms of socialist theory and practice are thoroughly exhausted; or that accession to political power of the working class is not on ‘the agenda’ of Western capitalism and least of all Britain.”(p3) But even if we accept this situation as an accurate understanding of the present situation does this mean that this aim cannot be realised? Instead, it could be suggested that the balance of class forces is not favourable for the realisation of a socialist alternative in the immediate future and that instead the defenders of capitalism are in the ascendency. But this does not mean that the possibility of change cannot occur and that this could mean the possibilities of such a development could occur in the long term. The point is that a Marxist would suggest that people cannot become reconciled to capitalism in a permanent manner and that this means that unrest could develop that is able to result in the transformation of society. However, it is the view of the author that a resurgence of a socialist influence within the working class is not likely to occur in the future and that instead the capitalist system is dominant in an uncontested manner. But such a view is dogmatic even if we can accept that the possibility of progressive change is difficult to realise. The point is that the continuation of capitalism means that the subordination of the workers within the economic system means that its possible discontent and opposition to the system could become an actuality. Therefore, the acceptance of capitalism by the working class is because of political and ideological reasons rather than a genuine acceptance of the apparent merits of the present system. But the standpoint of the author is that the working class has neither the radical consciousness nor capacity to be able to realise radical change. Instead, it must accommodate to a situation of subordination within the present social system and accept that any progress has to be realised within the context of the continuation of capitalism. Indeed, the author contends that this lack of possibilities to realise the socialist alternative is accepted by the workers and so they attempt to achieve progress within the context of the capitalist system. It is also implied by Selbourne that the decline of manufacturing industry means that the possibilities to realise socialism are being undermined by what is the development of an adverse economic situation. However, the point is that the defenders of socialism within the UK have always had to contend with the aspect of a challenging situation. They have had to accept that the aim of socialism has minority support within the working class and so it is continually necessary to try and develop the credibility of this objective. In other words, the aim of socialism does not necessarily have popular support and so it is a challenge for the supporters of this objective to try and establish new and more credible reasons why it should be realised. In other words, socialists who are not dogmatists have to accept that the aim they uphold has only minority support and so they have to continually attempt to try and develop new reasons why it can be a credible aim.

But Selbourne would suggest that social and economic change has undermined the possibility to establish the popularity of the socialist objective. He comments that the process of social and economic change over the last two hundred years has undermined the collective strength of the working class and led to the undermining of its capacity to realise an alternative, and therefore: “And after two hundred years (at least) of capitalist industrialisation in Britain, in which at no point has there been a trail of strength for political power between capital and labour the steady contraction of Britain’s manufacturing industry has arguably set the seal on such a prospect.”(p9) But this is a caricatured view of British industry which ignores the importance of the rise of the Chartists and ignores the role of events like the general strike and the election of the radical Labour government in 1945. He also ignores the importance of the period since the 1970’s in which there has been the expression of an intensification of opposition of the interests of capital and conservatism to the gains of the workers and the connected attempt to end the role of the welfare state. The fact that socialism did not become a popular ideology of the workers in struggle did not mean that the class struggle did not intensify. In terms of spontaneous actions, the workers attempted to defend the role of the welfare state against the attempt of conservatism to undermine the importance of this development. The period since 1979 has been that of implicit class struggle between the forces of capital and labour in relation to the issue of the attempt to maintain or end the importance of the welfare state. The Conservatives have introduced a policy of austerity in order to undermine the influence of the workers within the economy. This situation has not been uncontested and instead has led to the role of important struggles like that of the miner’s strike in 1984 in order to uphold the importance of the trade unions within the economy. But possibility the most important reaction to the austerity of the Conservative government of the 1980’s was the role of the popular anti-poll tax struggle which led to an important success for the people and the effective modification of this economic policy. Indeed, it could be suggested that the right-wing conservative government between 1979 and the 1990’s led to intensified class struggle and the administration could only achieve success by the imposition of a policy of austerity and mass unemployment. This situation did not necessarily mean the revival of the influence of the aim of socialism, but it did mean that forms of militant and defensive struggles of the workers could still create the conditions for the emergence of the importance of the popularity of the objective of an alternative to capitalism. The point was that it was the authoritarian conservative governments of the 1980’s that indicated in practical terms that the aim of an alternative to the capitalist system had not become outmoded. Instead, this objective of post-capitalism was shown to be relevant because of the very intensification of the role of class struggle.

But Selbourne suggests that the marginalisation of Marxism and the aim of socialism is because of the increasingly lack of credibility of this approach. Selbourne explains that there has been a generalised situation of the development of less support for socialism within the working class, but even if we accept that this is an accurate explanation of the political views of many workers in the present period could it also be suggested that this development is permanent? Instead, could it be contended that the present ascendency of Conservatism since the 1970’s is because of a general failure of reformism to uphold an alternative. Selbourne also suggests that the reason that the Labour party cannot establish a credible conception of socialism is because this aim is not feasible. But the point is that the Labour party has tended to adapt to capitalism as a result of the fact that its commitment to an alternative is not principled or upheld in a consistent manner. Hence the problem is not that the Labour party upholds a dogmatic conception of socialism but instead that it does not justify this objective in consistent terms and is instead more inclined to adapt to the continuation of capitalism. Hence the approach of support for reforms becomes the basis to effectively reject the importance of the aim of socialism in terms of this emphasis on what are short-term objectives. Indeed, the recent Labour governments have become enthusiastic supporters of the continuation of capitalism and there fore the aim of socialism is replaced by the importance of the role of the welfare state. Thus, it could be suggested that the major ideological division in society is between the defence of capitalism as elaborated and practiced by the Conservatives and a more progressive type of capitalism as upheld by the Blair governments. Indeed, the political result of Thatcherism is to undermine the influence of the justification of an alternative to capitalism and instead to result in the development of Social Democracy as an explicit defender of what could be defined as a progressive capitalist system. In this manner the approach of what could be defined as genuine socialism became reduced to the political views of the small Marxist groups. This situation represented the influence of Thatcherism within the Labour party and meant that even traditional reformist aims became replaced by the development of a type of politics that was based on a process of ideological and political adaptation to Thatcherism. Hence Selbourne’s understanding of the popular decline of the aim of socialism is not primarily the results of attitudes within the working class, which is his view, but is instead the expression of the increasingly right-wing trajectory of the Labour party under Blairism.

The problem is that any discontent with the role of the Labour party under Blair did not result in any expression of effective left-wing opposition and instead it seemed that the only possibility was related to adaptation to the support of the present social system provided by the leadership of Blair. This situation seemed to be unchallengeable until the development of the Corbyn led Labour party in the recent period. However, the potential of this situation was undermined by the serious electoral defeat that occurred in the recent period. It seemed that the populism of Boris Johnston was able to provide a democratic basis for the ascendency of a type of capitalism that could not be opposed by a credible socialist alternative. In other words, the issue of the apparent conservatism of the British working class that is being indicated by Selbourne is not an expression of an inherent political attitude but is instead connected to the effective ability of the Conservative party to be elected to the government of the UK. Consequently, the conservative attitudes of the British working class are connected to the ability of the right-wing parties to be able to articulate and express the support within the people for the present system. In contrast the Labour party is increasingly unable to represent the views of the working class in an effective manner. Indeed, it could be suggested that the Blair led Labour party was only able to express the aims of the workers because it adopted a form of conservative political agenda. Thus, the approach of socialism was marginalised in this situation. In other words, the standpoint of socialism became reduced to being the aspiration of small political parties and instead the system of capitalism acquired popular legitimacy via the ascendency of both the conservative party and the Blair led Labour party. In this situation the organisations of revolutionary Marxism were increasingly marginalised, and the expression of alternatives was limited to various protest movements connected to the role of single-issue campaigns. Thus, the opposition to various gulf wars led to the development of mass protest movements but they did not represent the politics of a socialist opposition in any effective manner. Instead, the standpoint of capitalism became consolidated in the period 1980-2020, and the influence of a socialist perspective was reduced to being the perspective of a few intellectuals. Indeed, it became increasing apparent that few people knew what was meant by the aim of socialism. Instead, this aim was merely the perspective of a small number of Marxist groups, and so opposition to the system was reduced to being the expression of the views of various protest groups. But these organisations knew what they were against, but they did not strive to realise a socialist alternative in any credible manner. Thus, the aim of socialism no longer had any popular expression. However, this situation did not mean that there was any genuine support for capitalism. Instead, people could not envisage any possible alternative to the domination of the present social system. In this context of demoralisation about the credibility of progressive aims meant that in a pessimistic manner people accepted the continuation of capitalism. Furthermore, increasingly people no longer had any coherent understanding of what was meant by the socialist alternative. Therefore, it was not that there was genuine support for capitalism but instead what was apparent was the lack of belief in the possibility to realise an alternative type of progressive society. Indeed, people no longer had any coherent understanding of what was meant by the socialist alternative to capitalism. This situation did not mean that history had ended in capitalism, which would be a dogmatic perspective. Instead, there was scepticism about the credibility of a socialist alternative. The apparent unchallengeable domination of capitalism meant that what became increasingly apparent was that this situation led to people becoming generally ignorant about what was meant by socialism and so this lack of knowledge about the feasibility of alternatives to the present system meant that the very radical culture that had always been present within capitalist society began to be undermined. Instead, it seemed that the defenders of the capitalist system had become ideologically dominant in a manner that could not be challenged by an alternative conception of socialism because people no longer understood what was meant by this aim.

Does this situation mean that capitalism can no longer be challenged and ended? In the short term this conclusion would seem to be credible. The forces of revolutionary socialism are small and marginalised, and they are divided between the opposing groups of anarchists and Marxists. Instead, the only effective organisations are those connected to single issue campaigns which seem to aim at modifying rather than overcoming capitalism. However, the various Marxist groups refuse to accept the serious nature of the situation and they seem to fail to develop an understanding of their present adverse circumstances. Instead, they often promote over-ambitious programmes that seem to have little comprehension of their unfavourable political circumstances. The result is an inability to come to terms with an adverse political situation that is generally unfavourable in relation to the prospects for developing support for a radical socialist alternative. These developments do not indicate that capitalism is an inherently superior system and instead only express the important political limitations of the socialist organisations. Nor do the rival socialist parties understand the necessity of unity and of providing a common programme of radical objectives. In this context it would seem that the situation is characterised by the increasing ascendency of conservative type parties and the decline of the left-wing alternative. This means the present social system seems to be unchallengeable because of these problems and the failure to develop a popular alternative to the present system. However, the only promising aspect of this situation is that people do not support the capitalist system in a genuine manner. Instead, they reluctantly accept its domination because of the apparent inability to develop mass support for a radical alternative. People do not necessarily support the continuation of capitalism in any genuine manner, but they also cannot envisage the credibility of an alternative type of socialist society. Instead, this attitude of scepticism is important for explaining the difficulties involved in trying to develop the influence of alternatives. People do not necessarily genuine support capitalism in any affirmative manner, but they also cannot conceive of the credibility of socialism. Indeed, it is doubtful whether many people still have an understanding of what is meant by socialism. In the context of this political ignorance, it would seem that there is no alternative to the continuation of capitalism. Most people are not enthusiastic supporters of the present system, but they have no conception of what could replace it. In this context the marginalisation of the Marxist groups only contributes to the domination of the ideological view that there is no alternative to capitalism. However, these organisations do not provide a credible strategy that would attempt to address this issue of marginalisation. Instead, this unfavourable situation seems to have become enduring, and this results in a false optimism in which the groups promote various programmes for social change that seem to have little relationship to the present unfavourable political situation. In other words, the various justifications of illusory perspectives means that the various socialist parties are unable to provide policies that could credibly address the challenges of their marginalisation in what is an unfavourable situation. But this failure means that what becomes promoted is a politics based on illusion rather than addressing the difficulties of what is an unfavourable situation. But the very lack of realism of the Marxist groups means that they do not seem credible and so are unable to develop popular support. Instead, they become organisations based on a collection of dedicated supporters but their ability to relate to people in general is problematical. The result of this situation is the role of various Marxist groups which advocate what seem to be incredible programmes of radical change. None of the organisations seem to address their actual situation of marginalisation. In this context the approach of Selbourne seems to be more credible when justifying the apparent ascendency of capitalism and so implying that the development of alternatives is problematical. Indeed, it could be suggested that the past fifty years seems to generally justify the confidence that is expressed about the ability of the present system to remain in the ascendency. The task of socialists is to try and explain in a non-dogmatic manner why this confidence in capitalism can still be called into question. However this approach has to tackle the challenges posed by the apparent supremacy of capitalism.

It is suggested by Selbourne that there is a general expression of confusion about what is meant by socialism by its supporters. He comments: “Thus the question of whether socialism is the replacement of the ‘free market’ by the nationalisation of the means of production, the social control of investment and generalised state planning, whether it is workers self-management and libertarian anti-statism….whether it is capitalism plus the National Health service….has bewildered and divided the Labour party, and its most energetic followers in the best socialist tradition.”(p14) But these issues have to be connected to the difficulties involved in trying to develop support for a socialist alternative which is ultimately compromised by a standpoint of accommodation to capitalism. In other words, the major tendencies in the Labour party do not have a credible conception of transformation to a different socialist society and instead have an approach that is based on a perspective of accommodation to capitalism. In this manner they suggest that reforms will be sufficient in order to realise the aims of the development of socialism. But this approach has not been successful. However, the alternative of revolutionary Marxism has not become popular and able to persuade people about the necessity of a process of radical change. In other words, the various strategies of change of the supporters of the aims of socialism has not been historically credible and so the result of this situation is the development of a political impasse that has not been resolved in a progressive manner. Instead because of this political and strategic impasse it would seem that the only credible alternative is for people to attempt to realise improvements within the limitations of the capitalist system. In other words, the problem is that it seems to be a difficult task to promote the realisation of the aim of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. Hence the only realistic approach is to attempt to achieve aims that relate the issue of social progress to the ultimate objective of the realisation of socialism. However, there are important reasons why this perspective is not realised, and this failure is connected to the very importance of the influence of the view that socialism is not a credible objective. Hence it would seem that Selbourne is correct to assume that capitalism seems to be the only credible and practical system. However, it is the very limitations of capitalism which means that the potential for increasing support of an alternative is not overcome in a definitive manner. Instead, the aspects of the limitations of capitalism such as the aspect of exploitation and inequality means that the dynamics of radical change cannot be emphatically overcome. However, this is the very conclusion made by Selbourne. He suggests that socialism is ultimately an elitist objective that cannot be realised by the expression of a process of democratic change: “There is the brute fact, for example, that socialism as a fundamental reordering and transformation of the capitalist system cannot possibly come about by constitutional and democratic methods.”(p14) Hence he suggests that people will not support the attempt to realise this objective because they consider that the expression of democracy is more important than the attempt to achieve a socialist alternative. But this view would seem to dogmatically deny the possibility to relate the role of democracy to the possibility to achieve the objective of socialism. The point is that the Labour party, which has had the most support within the people for a radical alternative has consistently supported a perspective of adaptation to capitalism rather than uphold the possibility of genuine transformation to socialism. Thus, the major problem is not that socialism is not a credible and practical perspective but instead that the very parties that should support the attempt to realise this aim have instead becomes reconciled with the continuation of capitalism.

Selbourne also refers to the fact that there is no genuine unity within the Labour party about what is meant by socialism: “Thus the question of whether socialism is the replacement of the ‘free market’ by the nationalization of the means of production, the social control of investment and generalised state planning, whether it is workers self-management and libertarian anti-statism; whether it is no more than enlightened Benthamism of the public school liberal; whether it is capitalism plus the National Health Service; or whether it is egalitarian moral aspiration, and fraternal ethic and construction of the New Jerusalem, has bewildered and divided the Labour party, and its most engaged followers, in the best socialist tradition.”(p14) These differences primarily express the fact that there are important problems about how to achieve socialism. The point is that the very role of a Labour government within the capitalist system has to adapt to the supremacy of the mode of production means that the attempt to achieve the aims of socialism are essentially compromised. However, Selbourne would consider that this situation is because of the untenable character of the aim of socialism rather than the result of the limitations of the various strategies by which the attempt to realise this objective is realised. He comments: “Indeed they provide the most basic evidence that it is the nature of the ‘socialist alternative’ itself, and not the inadequate consciousness of working people, to which the left must turn its attention, if it wishes to understand the reasons for its own ideological and political failures, as economic and social crisis deepens.”(p15) But can the lack of support for the socialist alternative be equated with its apparent lack of credibility and possibility? Could it not be suggested that the effective ideological justification of capitalism has led to continual popular support for the present system despite its enduring problems?

In contrast Selbourne considers that socialism can never acquire sufficient popular support in order to ensure that it can be realised in democratic terms. He comments: “There is the brute fact, for example, that socialism as a fundamental reordering and transformation of the capitalist system cannot possibly come about by constitutional and democratic methods.” (p15-16) In other words socialism can only be the result of a process of coercive change which would actually undermine the possibility to achieve a genuine democratic system connected to the attempt to realise the aims of socialism. Hence this seems to suggest that what is being implied is that it is not practically feasible to realise socialism by democratic political processes. Instead, it can only be established by authoritarian methods which would undermine the possibility to achieve a genuine form of socialism. In other words, the expression of the role of democracy is most compatible with the aims of the supporters of capitalism. Thus, this would imply that the only manner in which a form of socialism can be realised is the utilisation of bureaucratic and elitist methods which would actually undermine the credibility of this objective. Instead, the conclusion being made is that only the supporters of capitalism are able to justify the system they support in genuinely democratic terms. Only the character of capitalism is able to create the level of popular support that can suggest that it is possible to maintain this type of society as an expression of the process of democratic accountability. But is this situation the result of the genuine relation of capitalism to the role of an authentic democracy is it because people are resigned to the continuation of the present system because they cannot envisage the possibility to realise a socialist alternative. Is the aspect of the ideological domination of capitalism more important than the recognition of the limitations of the system? In other words, is Selbourne right to imply that capitalism continues because people recognise its inherent superiority and efficiency? Would it not be more accurate to suggest that capitalism continues because people lack the confidence to believe that their political activity can result in radical change? Therefore, the system is perpetuated not because of an expression of popular support but instead a resigned acceptance of the domination of capital over labour.

Selbourne suggests that it is difficult to relate the objectives of the middle class and the workers in terms of support for the common aim of socialism: “Thus the rainbow light called “socialism” contains all the colours of the moral spectrum; as self-denying struggle against the evils of competition, as the solidarity of the exploited, as uneasy middle class altruism, or as more public spending on the welfare system…..Not surprisingly there is a precarious relationship between, say, middle class socialist aspiration compensating for its privileges and/or for inherited moral indifference on the one hand, and for righteous anger, of its working class victims on the other.”(p16-17) But this assumption of differences of interests and objectives of the workers and middle class is questionable because it could be suggested that socialism represents a broad aim that is able to reconcile the possible different aims of different strata of society. But what can unite these specific sections of society is a common opposition to the aim of trying to impose the privileged interests of the objectives of the capitalist class. However, it is the connected difficulties of trying to establish this progressive form of unity which can undermine the development of a common struggle against capitalism. But such a problem is not connected to the influence of support for capitalism but is instead the result of the influence of ideologies of popular nationalism and the connection of the role of the present economic system with the defence of the role of the nation state.

But Selbourne refers to another problem which is that the very isolation of Marxism results in its justification of forms of elitism. This means that the ideological justification of the objectives of Marxism are no longer understood by the people and instead the very expression of the aim of socialism seems to be the standpoint of an intellectual elite. In this manner the opposing standpoint of support for capitalism becomes defined as being a justification of the aspirations of the people. Indeed, this approach was utilised in order to support the perspective of Thatcherism. It could be suggested that this problem is inevitable given the common division between the standpoint of socialism from the usual aspirations of the working class. Hence socialism becomes to be conceived as a representation of the views of a section of middle class intellectuals and this means that it is no longer connected to the aims of the workers. However, it could be suggested that this problematical issue is not unusual and is instead a common aspect of the political history of most capitalist societies. Therefore, it is the very task of the socialist parties to attempt to develop support for their objectives within the working class. In other words, ideological struggle is an inherent aspect of the attempt to develop increased influence for the aim of socialism and so does not imply that this aim is not credible. Instead, what has to be understood is that the elaboration of the credibility of socialism has to be a necessary task within capitalist society. Hence the major problem of the major left-wing parties within capitalist society is now with the apparent lack of credibility of socialism but instead that these organisations increasingly no longer attempt to support this aim in convincing terms. Instead, they seem to accept the view that there is no genuine alternative to the continuation of capitalism. In other words what has become apparent is that the process of ideological accommodation to the present social system is an integral aspect of the reformist parties. Furthermore, the remaining genuinely Marxist parties lack popular support and so are unable to promote the popular effectiveness of an alternative. Instead, they have to accommodate to the present situation and so uphold the aims of socialism in what seems to be an increasingly abstract and dogmatic manner. In this context it is not difficult for the ideology of support for capitalism to be hegemonic. The economic and social policies of the various conservative parties define the character of the contemporary political situation, and the expression of a genuine Marxist and socialist alternative is marginalised. Selbourne would imply that this situation is because of the inherent lack of credibility of Marxism but this development is connected to the present ideological supremacy of the justification of capitalism. The very marginalisation of Marxism seems to express its lack of credibility, and so the result of this development seems to be the unchallenged supremacy of the defenders of capitalism. However, it could be suggested that with a more credible programme it may be possible to end the present decline of the influence of the role of Marxism. The point is that the limitations of capitalism means that the present system has not become inherently durable. Instead, the continued development of problems of unemployment and inflation can generate continual possible creation of support for a socialist alternative. But if such a possibility is to be realised it is necessary that the various Marxist groups attempt to elaborate convincing perspectives of change. However it could be suggested that the failure to address this issue means that these groups remain marginal and not an integral aspect of the political system.

In other words, the various Marxist groups promote various programmes that do not address the issue of their actual marginalisation and insignificance within society. Instead, they advocate a collection of demands that they assume the people will support in an automatic and immediate manner. However, the failure for this perspective to be realised is not analysed and the result is that the various Marxist groups promote a standpoint based on the generation of various illusions about the supposed development of a favourable process of class struggle and its connection to the realisation of socialism. What would instead be more useful would be the attempt to relate the issue of the actual marginalisation of the various Marxist parties in the present political situation and as a result attempt to appreciate the difficulties involved in trying to achieve the aim of socialism. Selbourne would suggest that the reason for the apparent insignificance of the Marxist groups is because of the apparent superior character of capitalism and the connected importance of the role of parties like the Conservatives that support the ascendency of the present system. But there has also been a situation of a systematic offensive of the defenders of capital since the 1980’s which has undermined the influence of the labour movement. The result of this situation has been to uphold the supremacy of the present system and so discredit the plausibility of the socialist alternative. However, this situation does not indicate an inherent superiority of capitalism and instead only indicates that the forces of conservatism and capital have been able to undermine the influence of the role of an alternative to the present system. This development has been connected to the generation of a situation of mass unemployment and austerity which indicates that only the economics and politics of recession is able to undermine the influence of the working class within society. In other words, there is no apparent superiority of capitalism and instead it is only the influence of ideology and the perpetual reproduction of the economic system that ensures that a process of transition to a new socialist type of society is not realised. However, Selbourne would suggest that this situation is only possible because people accept the continuation of capitalism as implied by the role of conservative ideology. In this manner it could be suggested that the objectives of the present system are democratically accepted by the people and in contrast the aims of socialism are only supported by a small minority of society. This point is generally correct, but it could be suggested that as long as the domination of capital over labour continues then the result is the development of discontent within society. The result of this situation is that at a certain moment in the future there will be an attempt by the people to try and change this situation of the exploitation of labour by capital. In other words, the capitalist system continues to be dominant not because it is inherently progressive but instead because people presently accept the situation of the supremacy of capital over labour.

However, Selbourne ignores these objections to the continuation of the domination of capital because he implies that the very durability of the system is an indication of its inherent superiority. Hence, he implies that people acknowledge this situation and as a result the aims of socialism are a marginal force within society. But can we equate the apparent lack of popular support for the aim of socialism with the assumption that this aim is not credible? Instead, is it not less dogmatic to assume that all that has been indicated by this situation is that the forces of conservatism have been able to achieve political and economic supremacy within society. But this situation has been regularly challenged by the various struggles of the workers since the 1970’s. Only the effective defeat of the influence of the workers in the last twenty years has enabled the development of what has become an unchallenged domination of capital within the economy and society. But this means that this situation could become challenged if there is a revival of the importance of collective struggle by the workers. In other words, the ascendency of capital is not supported in a genuine manner by the people but instead this development is an expression of the recent ability of the defenders of the supporters of capital to engage in an offensive against the workers. Hence it is possible that the generation of successful struggles could change the balance of class forces and so revive the importance of the aim of socialism. But it will be suggested that this is a very hopeful perspective that has little relationship to the present economic and political situation. The recent period since the offensive of capital in the 1980’s has indicated a process of perpetual ascendency of the forces of capital. But this very development does not indicate that people voluntarily accept the role of the capitalist system and instead only reluctantly accept what seems to be the results of defeats in the class struggle. Hence it could still be suggested that a credible perspective of radical change could transform the situation. But what is this programme? The problem seems to be that the very development of capitalism has only led to the increased ascendency of the employers in this situation. In contrast the forces of the workers seem to be declining in influence and iimportance. Hence the important issue that is obvious is whether this situation indicates what has become an inherent decline in the influence of the workers within the economy and society or instead is the situation an indication of a prolonged victory for capital and conservatism over the past forty years? In other words what has occurred is not the expression of a genuine process of democratic change in which people voluntarily accept the situation of the domination of capital in society but is instead the result of defeats in the class struggle. Therefore, if socialism is to become a credible objective it is necessarily to try and promote a strategy that will facilitate a process of change that will realise this possibility.

However, it would seem that this prospect is complicated by what seems to be an inherent weakening of the importance of the role of labour within the economy. This development seems to have facilitated the successful realisation of what is essentially an offensive of capital against labour. Selbourne would connect this development to a rejection of the Marxist view that capitalism is creating inherent tendencies for its transformation. Instead, he contends that socialism has been based on the belief that the workers would act to realise this aim but in actuality capitalism ‘is not creating the conditions for its own transformation’. (Selbourne p18) Indeed he would suggest that even the modest Social Democratic aim of the role of a mixed economy of private and public enterprise has become untenable in the recent period. Instead, the present situation is only favourable to the intensification of the domination of capital within the economy and society. But the point is whether this situation has been inevitable or is the outcome of an offensive by the forces of capital against labour. If we accept that this latter outcome has occurred, then we also have to admit that it could have been possible for labour to develop a strategy that was able to facilitate the development of effective opposition by the workers to the attempt to consolidate the domination of capital within society. Scepticism about this possibility in this context would represent a form of political pessimism that was not actually an accurate expression of the importance of the workers within the economy. In other words, it has not been the declining significance of labour that has led to this apparent inability to challenge the domination of capital but instead this situation must be the result of the role of the influence of an ideology that has encouraged class collaboration rather than class struggle. The majority of people have become supporters of capitalism and so for this reason they have been reluctant to connect class aims with the expression of opposition to the present social system. Instead, people have been satisfied with attempting to achieve limited aims like wage rises and have not attempted to undermine and overcome the importance of the domination of capital within the economy. Selbourne would suggest that this situation is because capitalism in some manner realises the aspirations of the people and so because of this aspect the domination of the system is not challenged by the role of mass struggle. Instead, the attempt to achieve wage rises has limited objectives and is not connected to the aspiration to transform the relations of the economy and society.

But what we have to ask is whether this development is an expression of the present balance of forces or is instead because of the inherent lack of credibility of the objective of socialism. Selbourne would suggest the latter option because his approach is based on the denial of the feasibility of the aim of socialism. Hence, he would suggest that socialism is the outcome of the ideology of intellectuals but in contrast most people are motivated to try and achieve improvements within the present capitalist system. Furthermore, the apparent decline of the influence of Marxism would suggest that popular support for the aim of socialism has been ended and instead people attempt to realise their aspirations within the context of the role of the present capitalist system. But is this development the result of a popular expression of the opinions of the people or has it instead been the outcome of developments within the class struggle? In other words, has there been a successful offensive of capital against labour? We would suggest that important events of the past forty years indicate the importance of a strategy to facilitate the intensification of the domination of capital within society and that the related generation of an adverse balance of class forces has been the most important aspect in promoting the discrediting of the socialist alternative. But this very development indicates that the role of a feasible socialist strategy could transform this situation in favour of the objectives of achieving progressive change. Hence the important problem has been the failure to develop this credible perspective of transformation and the result has been to facilitate the influence of fatalism within the working class about the inevitable implementation of a reactionary social policy. In this context a significant issue has been the unpopular character of the forces favouring radical change. Hence the attempt to promote the aims of socialism has not occurred in an effective manner. But there has also been a general crisis of the approach of reformism and increasingly reformists have become uncritical defenders of the capitalist system as with the role of the Tony Blair Labour government. The major problem has been that in this situation revolutionary Marxists have still been un-marginal and unpopular and this has meant the influence of socialism has not replaced that of a declining reformism. Hence what has become apparent is a crisis of left-wing politics in the context of the apparent unchallenged supremacy of the role of bourgeois ideology. In this context the approach of radical socialism has become increasingly marginal, and this development is connected to the increased importance of various forms of right-wing populism.

In other words, it would seem that the very contemporary political attitudes of the people are not conducive to the generation of the influence of a credible perspective of socialism. However, this development does not actually mean that the concept of socialism has been discredited in an effective manner, instead what seems to be apparent is that the aim of socialism seems to have been repudiated in terms of the expression of the democratic opinion of the people. Therefore, it could be suggested that it is still possible that these political circumstances will change and that the result will be a resurgence of support for the standpoint of socialism. But what organisation will develop that will be able to promote the aim of socialism in a more popular and effective manner? This issue would seem to be of primary importance and so it is necessary to try and evaluate the credibility of a contemporary Marxist standpoint. On this basis it becomes possible to be able to assess whether in the contemporary period the forces of Marxism are still relevant or have become inherently insignificant. Obviously, we have to recognise that the various Marxist organisations are presently very small and apparent of an irrelevant character. But is the result of what could still be defined as temporary circumstances, or instead could it be suggested that this situation is of a long-term nature? In other words, has Marxism become an irrelevance? This issue will be discussed in terms of an evaluation of an important contemporary justification of Marxism. What is of relevance in this context is whether the Marxist understanding of capitalism is still of importance in terms of developments within the modern economy. Primarily we have to establish whether the working class is still an important agency of change. If we can show the continued relevance of Marxism then this would still seem to suggest that the development of the influence of this revolutionary approach can still generate the possibility of making progress towards the transformation of capitalist society into socialism.

However, Selbourne would suggest that this very perspective is unrealistic because the economic and social situation of the working class depends on the importance of the stability of capitalism. Thus, the very economic self-interest of the workers is connected to the role of a capitalist economy. Hence it would seem to be ideological dogma to suggest that the system of socialism is in the interests of the workers. Instead, they achieve material and social progress by the development of the economic success of capitalism. However, this stance would seem to be contradicted by the implementation of a prolonged period of austerity which has led to the undermining of the material gains that people have made under capitalism. Indeed, it could be suggested that in the recent period the consolidation of the strength of capitalism has only occurred in terms of the development of the demise of the influence of the workers within society. Instead, the ability to achieve the stability of capitalism has depended on the undermining of the importance of the workers within the economy and in society in general. Hence the aspect of prosperity has declined in importance and instead the domination of the present system is based on the consolidation of the domination of capital over labour. Therefore, it could be suggested that there has not been an expression of genuine support for capitalism but instead the consolidation of the domination of the present economic system based on the role of an offensive in economic and political terms in order to achieve the consolidation of the system. However, Selbourne would deny this conclusion because he considers that both capital and labour have a common interest in the prosperity of the economy. But the problem with this view is that the very consolidation of the domination of capitalism has been based on the imposition of austerity over a prolonged period since 1980. This development has not been automatic and instead is the result of the economic and political policies of mainly Conservative governments. This has meant the aims of capitalism have been implemented in terms of the methods of class struggle. The importance of the ideology of populist nationalism has been utilised in order to uphold what has been an offensive of capital against labour. However, Selbourne tries to deny this aspect of class struggle by suggesting that the ‘well-being’ of the workers is connected to the ‘health of capital’. (p20) But the point is that the apparent unity of the role of capital and labour is an imposed aspect of what has been the class struggle and the offensive of Conservative governments in order to implement policies that uphold the interests of the present economic system. There has been no expression of genuine national unity and instead the expression of the economic and social aims of various governments has been based on the continual undermining of the importance of the working class within society. Selbourne would suggest that the inherent limitations of the politics of the various types of left wing opinion is because ‘the ultimate logic of their politics must be that of seeking to advance the prosperity of capital in the interests of labour’. (p20) But this standpoint is connected to the rejection of the approach of left wing socialism in favour of the advocacy of right wing reformism. The point is that there is no necessary reason why this approach should be supported and instead what is being justified is a perspective of class collaboration instead of an emphasis on the importance of class struggle. But Marxists would suggest that the very importance of the recent period of austerity is an indication that the present character of capitalism is not conducive to genuine cooperation between different classes. Instead, the imposition of austerity has expressed the development of an adverse balance of class forces that is against the interests of the workers. But this situation is an indication that the relevance of the objective of socialism is connected to the apparent fact that it is the only genuine alternative to the prolonged situation of austerity and its connection to the aspect of economic and political inequality. But this aspect is effectively denied by Selbourne who reduces the issue of the apparent contemporary irrelevance of socialism to the fact that this aim no longer seems to have popular support. Selbourne comments that: “Indeed the lingering expectation that the socialist alternative can be revived around the old political constituency, and around the old constellation of socialist ideas, however refurbished as ‘workers self-management’ or the politics of a glib ‘participation’ needs to be firmly resisted. To promote illusions which have already failed…is merely to block the path for genuinely new forms of radical critique of our world and institutions.” (p29) Thus the conclusion can be made that: “It ought now also to have taught us that, fitful and bitter conflicts between capital and labour notwithstanding, a coherent and organised working class basis for mass socialist opposition to private property and its dominion cannot now be reconstituted. Moreover, the simple or naïve view of working class agency in the transcendence of Western capitalism and militarism is what it always was: a utopian reduction of the actual enormity of the task of such transcendence to intellectually manageable proportion.” (p29) In other words the socialist objective has nothing to do with actual working class interests and aspirations and is instead an expression of the middle class radical aim of socialism. But the point is that the very role of progressive middle-class intellectuals in the elaboration of the objective of socialism does not mean that this aim is inherently of an elitist character. Instead, it is connected to the understanding that workers have to establish by their own mass activity the basis for the transformation of society in order to realise a socialist alternative. Without this development the possibility of socialism is not likely to be achieved. But instead, Selbourne is implying that socialism is an aim that has little to do with the actual expression of the interests of the workers. But what does represent the genuine aims of the workers. Selbourne seems reluctant to answer this question because he is content to uphold the vague notion that the majority of people are content to support a capitalist system that is able to realise their material aspirations. But he essentially upholds this conclusion because he considers that the present social system is able to realise the interests of the people in the most effective manner. Hence, he effectively denies the aspect of antagonism between the classes and instead considers that the aspirations of the people can be realised within capitalism. But it could be suggested that the very prolonged character of austerity means that this approach is problematical and that instead the actual consolidation of capitalism has been based on the undermining of the influence of the workers within society. Hence socialism is ultimately a credible objective because it is not actually possible to reconcile the interests of capital and labour. But this does not mean that socialism will be the inevitable result of this situation because it is the very political activity of the supporters of capital that attempts to undermine the economic and political influence of the workers. In this context the prolonged imposition of austerity represents a form of class struggle in order to undermine the economic and political influence of the workers within society. The result of this situation is that it has been possible to consolidate the domination of capitalism within society despite the fact that the situation of austerity effectively represents economic crisis. In other words, an adverse balance of class forces concerning the attempt to realise socialism means that capitalism may no longer be dynamic, but this situation does not mean that the possibility to realise this alternative to capitalism will be inevitably realised. Hence it is necessary to try and elaborate a strategy for change that is able to express the complexities of the adverse situation concerning the prospects of success in the class struggle. Hence in theory it is possible to develop a valid conception of a strategy of change and what is meant by socialism, but in practice is seems to be impossible to be able to realise these objectives.

But Selbourne suggests that socialism is an inherently middle class aim that has little relationship to the actual experiences and interests of the workers. But this means he considers the process of the theoretical formation of this aim by middle class intellectuals like Marx as an expression of the apparent fact that this objective has little to do with the actual aspirations of the workers. However, this criticism would seem to be problematical because the expression of this conception of socialism is generally based on the elaboration of the aim of the liberation of the workers from the situation of the domination of capital. It could be suggested that this approach is unrealistic but the persistence of the ideology of socialism is an indication of the limitations of capitalism which is a system that has to be based on the exploitation of labour. Hence the ultimate credibility of socialism as an objective is provided by the limitations of capitalism and the fact that it is a type of economy that has to be connected to the role of the subordination of labour within the economy. Hence the ultimate view of Selbourne is that the workers become reconciled to this situation and so support capitalism because it results in material and social benefits. But ultimately there has to be problems created by the expression of the aspects of the domination of labour by capital. Hence the aspect of class struggle can never be overcome or resolved and instead the consolidation of the system has to be based on the undermining of the ability of labour to be able to change the situation. In addressing this issue Selbourne would suggest that it is the very attitudes of the workers which have constituted an important opposition to the development of the influence of socialism. However, it could be suggested that this situation has not contributed to the genuine realisation of the interests of the workers. In other words, we can still suggest that only socialism is a credible expression of the ultimate interests of workers and so support for alternative ideologies only contributes to the consolidation of an economic and social system that is opposed to the genuine objectives of the working class. In other words, illusions about the necessity of capitalism only undermine the expression of the only aspiration that represents the aims of the workers which is that of socialism. Selbourne suggests that there is a national culture that influences all the classes of society, but the point is that this allegiance to a national culture only results in the undermining of the importance of socialism which is the only genuine expression of the interests of the workers. In other words, the ideological promotion of anti-socialist views within the workers can only result in the denial of the expression of the only objective that is in their interests which is the aim of socialism. Selbourne cannot essentially deny this view instead he has to merely emphasise the importance of non-socialism within the working class: “But above all, it is the organic historical strength in the working class of a wide range of (coherent) popular versions of non-socialist and anti-socialist belief which have always been at the heart of Labour’s chronic dilemmas; and it is precisely these forms which the left tries in vain to keep at a distance by reducing them to the ‘unsystematic’ or the ‘commonplace’. (p34) In other words the forces of the left wing are unable to explain or come to terms with what is defined as the expression of popular forms of anti-socialism. The socialists may blame the influence of bourgeois ideology but what is more apparent is the importance of the expression of the standpoint of popular support for capitalism within the working class and this aspect can often result in the election of conservative governments. In contrast what is being implied is that the approach of socialism lacks this type of popular support and is instead the expression of a minority opinion within the left-wing intellectuals and sections of the Labour party. Hence the problem for the supporters of socialism is that support for capitalism has a durable and popular appeal which their left-wing alternative lacks.

Selbourne concludes that “The truth is, rather, that the very ordinary forms of working class Toryism which we have before us is so serious and complex a business for socialists to deal with, precisely because of the greater frailties of their own theory and practice….Moreover only a form of working class Toryism, in a period of mass unemployment, could have taken such a large part of the moral ground once so confidently held by Labour…..For across the classes and deep into the labour movement, the proposition of the right that without ‘wealth creation’ there could be no enhancement of the quality of life or ‘civilisation’ in the first place, plainly has its own ideological capacity to gain access to the popular assent; and socialist illusion, in crisis equally evidently lacks it.”(p35) But this point only indicates the importance of the influence of bourgeois ideology and the possibility to obtain popular support for capitalism. However, this conclusion does not prove that capitalism is an inherently superior system, and that the objective of socialism is an illusion. The point is that people like Marx have been able to indicate the importance of the exploitation of labour by capital as the basis of the present economic system. This means that the issue of the emancipation of the workers is connected with the attempt to realise an alternative to the domination of capital. It could be suggested that this objective of emancipation is not advanced by the realisation of what could be defined as a socialist system, but this problem is not resolved by the continuation of capitalism which is based on the exploitation of the role of labour. Instead, what would be indicated would be the elaboration of a different type of system that was able to achieve the emancipation of the people in a manner that would be superior to the role of socialism. The point is that capitalism is a system that is based on the exploitation of labour and so this aspect continually results in the development of discontent and the connected aspiration to realise a social alternative. It may be that the supporters of capital have been able to successfully oppose any challenge that expresses the possibility of revolutionary change, but this situation does not mean that capitalism is an inherently superior type of social system. Instead, what is apparent is the difficulties involved in trying to realise a successful process of change. In other words, it could be accepted that the domination of the capitalist class is difficult to undermine but this does not mean that the system is inherently progressive of an expression of the highest form of social development. Indeed, it could be suggested that the supporters of capitalism have a difficult task in trying to justify the situation of the exploitation of labour as the basis of the development of the economic system they support. In other words, people like Marx have definitively indicated that the character of capitalism is based on the aspect of the exploitation of labour, and so this aspect suggests the necessity and possibility to achieve a more emancipatory alternative. In this context the defenders of capitalism can only justify the present situation by suggesting that the present system is the expression of the highest level of economic efficiency and that the alternative of socialism is not a credible possibility. Indeed, it would seem that the apparent failure of countries like the Soviet Union to achieve genuine socialism indicates that this means that capitalism is the only practical possible type of economic system. However, this view can only be considered to be credible if it can be shown that the attempt to realise a democratic and progressive type of socialism is not possible. But in order to justify this view it would to be definitively proved that people do not have the capacity to establish an emancipatory type of economy and society. But this conclusion can only be established in dogmatic terms based on a biased support for the supposed virtues of capitalism. In contrast it can be shown that humans have the capacity and dynamism necessary to realise a society based on the principles of socialism. Only the interests of the capitalist class undermine the potential to achieve this objective. The forces of capitalism have been successful in the class struggle, but this does not mean that the aim of socialism is inherently problematical or impractical. Instead, what is required is the development of a more effective strategy that would facilitate the ability to achieve the aim of socialism. However, this task is related to the development of what would be a popular and effective party aiming to achieve socialism. But this has been a difficult task because many potential socialist parties have been undermined by the ideology of reformism or Stalinism and it has not been possible to create a credible revolutionary alternative. Nor has spontaneous mass struggle been able to develop a dynamic that has been able to result in the successful realisation of socialism. Instead, the forces defending capitalism have been effective in undermining the possible success of the forces supporting the aim of socialism. But this development does not mean that the aim of socialism is inherently impractical because the very limitations of capitalism will continue to generate forms of discontent that will result in the possible creation of mass parties in favour of radical change. Indeed, the very failures of the parties of reformist social democracy does not mean the end of the struggle for progressive change, but instead indicates that these parties have to be replaced by the alternative of more militant forms of organisation. Indeed, the last twenty years has indicated the importance of various forms of protest about the limitations of aspects of capitalism. In other words, the failure to elect left-wing governments has not meant the end of unrest within capitalist society and instead has expressed new possibilities for progressive change. Hence it is necessary to develop a strategy that would be able to relate this development of forms of popular discontent with aspects of contemporary capitalism with the elaboration of what would be a more effective strategy of change.

An attempt to develop a perspective of radical change is developed by Tony McKenna in :The War Against Marxism’(Bloomsbury London 2021) He contends that the issue of the feasibility of a communist alternative to capitalism is based on the possibility of successful struggle by the workers against the domination of the present social system: “Marx, therefore was a communist in as much as he postulated communism as a stage in history which was driven by class struggle, and culminated in the creation of a modern proletariat which had the capacity to take control of the means of production and thereby relieve society of its class character. Furthermore, he envisaged the transition to communism as part of the endeavour of the oppressed proletariat to raise itself to political supremacy and economic domination in and through the furious repression of the class (bourgeoisie) it sought to displace. In other words, class struggle and proletarian revolution are not auxiliaries to Marx’s economic theory and its conception of historical unfolding; they are the fundaments which undergird the very possibility of communism and the creation of a classless world.”(p4) But it is suggested by Mckenna that this perspective has been undermined by events which have not led to this outcome because of the decline of the role of the industrial proletariat or the very success of Stalinism has led to the development of authoritarian societies that seem to have undermined the possibility to establish the credibility of a socialist perspective. But this view would imply that the attempt to uphold the approach of Marxism has actually been undermined by social and economic developments, nevertheless this attempt to reassert the credibility of this standpoint is what Mckenna is committed to upholding. But the problem is that he seems to accept that all the various creative modifications of Marxism are based on the effective undermining of its revolutionary principles. In other words, the assumption is made that Marxism is based on definitive principles that do not require any extended modification or elaboration. Hence it is suggested that the major aspects of the approach of Hegel are inherited and developed by Marx. This means: “Subject-object identity (In difference) is not presupposed from the outset. Its possibility emerges from the processes of human labour, i.e. self-conscious thought which is embodied in the world (the object) in and through practical activity. Subject-object identity is mediated and deepened through labour, that is, the object – the world – is infused with subjectivity, the activity of the subject, specifically the means by which human beings produce and reproduce the conditions of their own existence. Marx called that process ‘labour’ Hegel called it ‘work’. In changing the world, the subject therefore transforms itself; i.e. new forms of social organisation and epochs are called forth. Hegelianism and Marxism are both attempts to read the historical process according to its own immanent logic driven by its own internal contradictions. In becoming self-conscious of such an ontology of labour and the necessary moments which comprise it, humanity can become aware of the form and pattern of its historical development; in so doing, it can consciously harness the powers of production and the most progressive social tendencies which develop around them, culminating them in a form of social organisation which is rational and accords to the needs and concrete freedoms of all those who participate in it.”(p43-44) But the major problem with this understanding is that the principle of what constitute the possibility to overcome the domination of capital over labour is not connected to what could be considered to be a credible conception of change. Instead, the comment of McKenna in outlining the apparent views of Hegel and Marx is that they define the principles of change in a vague manner such as the role of consciousness or labour, but do not connect this to a strategy that would facilitate the realisation of this process of transformation. In other words, contemporary capitalist society is criticised for either expressing limitations on the development of consciousness, or the role of labour, but this viewpoint is not connected to the elaboration of a strategy that would facilitate the possibility to realise this perspective of the expression of the aims of these aspects of human activity. Indeed, it could be suggested that Marxism has essentially failed to develop a credible perspective of change, except for Gramsci’s conception of the importance of hegemony for facilitating the continuation of capitalism.

However, Mckenna effectively denies the problematical aspects of a Marxist strategy of change by suggesting that it is based on the realisation of the dynamics of the subject-object relationship. He comments: “Subject-object identity (indifference) is not presupposed from the outset. Its possibility emerges from the processes of human labour, i.e. self-conscious thought which is embodied in the world (the object) in and through practical activity. Subject-object identity is mediated and deepened through labour; that is, the object is – the world – is infused with subjectivity, transformed by the activity of the subject, specifically the means by which human beings produce and reproduce the conditions of their own existence. Marx calls that process ‘labour’; Hegel called it ‘work’. In changing the world, the subject thereby transforms itself; i.e. new forms of social organization and epochs are called forth. Hegelianism and Marxism are bot attempts to read this historical process according to its own immanent logic driven by its own internal contradictions. In becoming self-conscious of such an ontology of labour and the necessary moments which compromise it, humanity can become aware of the form and pattern of its own historical development; in so doing it can consciously harness the powers of production and the most progressive social tendencies which develop around them, culminating in a form of social organisation which is rational and accords to the needs and concrete freedoms of all those who participate in it.”(p44) Bu the problem is that this perspective of change des not satisfactorily establish the importance of the issues that undermine the possibility to realise this objective. The point is that capitalism develops the aspects that consolidate the domination of capital over labour and promotes an ideology that discredits the credibility of the aim of socialist change. The result of this situation is that the forces of Marxism and socialism can often be marginalised and instead it seems that the only possible outcome of this situation is the continuation of the ascendency of the system of capitalism. However, this development is the result of the various events in the class struggle and is not inevitable. But Mckenna considers that the approach of Marx is problematical because he envisages the potential for socialism in a dogmatic manner as the inevitable outcome of results in the class struggle and so does not sufficiently appreciate the difficult issues involved in trying to realise the demise of capitalism. However, Mckenna does not seem to provide an alternative type of strategy and instead seems content to criticise both over-optimistic elaborations of a Marxist perspective of change or alternatively to reject the sceptical view that seems to consider that the transformation of capitalism into socialism is not possible. But this type of rejection of the most common one-sided interpretations of Marxist political perspectives is not related to the development of a credible strategy of change. Instead, it has to be ultimately assumed that the contradictions of capitalism will generate the potential for the possibility of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. However, this perspective is not established beyond the view that the various limitations of post-Marxism have to be replaced by a superior alternative conception of radical change. But ultimately this standpoint is justified in terms of an implied moral assumption that the defence of capitalism is not possible because of the aspect of the exploitation of labour by capital. But it is not explained how the workers will be able to overcome the situation of the domination of capital which seems to be a consolidated aspect of the character of society. This criticism could be connected to the fact that parties which support the present social system seem to be continually elected to governmental office whilst the approach of revolutionary Marxism is generally marginalised. But this issue is not addressed by Mckenna who ultimately has to dogmatically imply that the exploitative limitations of capitalism will result in effective and popular forms of opposition. He has tried to justify his standpoint in terms of criticism of the pessimism of the Frankfurt school which cannot envisage the possibility to overcome the domination of capital. But the point is that it may be possible to outline important criticisms of this philosophical standpoint whilst still not being able to satisfactorily uphold the aims and objectives of an alternative optimistic approach. Instead, it seems that it is necessary to address the issues raised by the supporters of the Frankfurt school in a less dismissive manner. Indeed, it would seem that we have to address the issue of the perpetuation of the domination of capitalism in more credible terms.

Mckenna would suggest that he does tackle these issues with his analysis of the role of reification within capitalist society. But the problem is that he does not effectively discuss this issue because he instead uses the aspect of a contemporary film in order to express the importance of reification within contemporary society. But we could suggest that reification which is an expression of the importance of an alienated consciousness that is generated by the character of capital-labour relations results in the development of a situation in which people as an expression of the role of labour are prepared to accept the situation of the domination of capitalism. Hence the issue that needs to be addressed is how to challenge the aspect of the ideological supremacy of the present economic system which results in the acceptance of the ascendency of the capitalist economy. In other words, despite the continual aspect of the generation of an exploitative relationship between capital and labour because of the aspect of the development of an alienated consciousness it has to be shown that the forces of labour are able to engage in collective struggle in order to overcome this aspect of the supremacy of the present system. But this is the very approach that does not seem to be outlined by Mckenna because his discussion of the various opportunist aspects of left-wing intellectuals does not result in the establishment of their strategic limitations in terms of a failure to establish a perspective for the transformation of the present situation of the domination of capital. Mckenna does criticise the approach of Zizek for replacing the conception of the workers as the primary agency of social change with the role of the slum dwellers of third world countries, but the defence of the continued revolutionary role of labour is brief and ultimately unsatisfactory. It is considered that: “For Zizek these slum dwellers have a revolutionary potential not because they are enmeshed and unified by the productive process and an objective mode of economic exploitation in which a portion of the value-added surplus product of their labour power in its commodity form is annexed by an exploiting class; no rather their revolutionary power stems from the fact that they are In some wise ‘free’ from such outmoded determinations; they are understood as standing outside society rather than being immanent to it – freed from all substantial ties, dwelling in a free space, outside the police regulations of the state.”(p104-105) But this criticism does not establish the continued importance of the capital-labour relation in a credible manner. Instead, all that has been expressed is criticism of the attempt to replace this traditional approach with a new conception of the system of exploitation within capitalism. Hence the understanding of the continued importance of a Marxist orthodox conception of the relevance of the traditional Marxist understanding of the role of the capital-labour relations is being justified in defensive and what could be considered dogmatic terms, but this approach is not necessarily connected to developments within the contemporary world economy. However, the validity of this criticism can only be sufficiently established in relation to the analysis of the character of global capitalism in the present. This issue is carried out in terms of the elaboration of the importance of the concept of reification for understanding the consolidation of the domination of capital over labour.

In other words, Mckenna credibly considers that capitalism is a system that is able to generate the economic aspects that ensure the development of the domination of capital over labour. This situation Is described in the following manner: “In selling our labour power in its commodity form, we present ourselves before the market and to the employer as a ‘service’ or a ‘thing’, a motive power which can be integrated into the process of production and distribution in the same way as electricity, machinery and natural resources. In stepping into the workplace, your existence is manifested in its commodified form as a ‘reified thing’, and because you are reduced to just another abstract force in the processes of production, the experience of work under capitalism for the majority of people is an alienating one; they try to switch off while they are working on the tills or the factory line – because the fragmented, partial and monotonous character of their labour has nothing in common with the set of aspirations they have outside of work.”(p107-108) But how is it possible to develop a different non-alienated character of the role of labour given the apparently inherently alienating aspect of the role of work? In other words people can recognise that in some important sense they are dominated by the forces of capital but it is not apparent how this situation can be overcome and transformed by the development of different relations of production. In other words: “The fragmentation of the labour process under the conditions of industrial capitalism, therefore reifies the being of the worker, converting it into a virtue, an abstract, partial and one-sided force which is subordinate to the objective and overriding process of production itself – a process which appears to the worker as a relentless and alien power which looms over and diminishes him.”(p109) But this expression of the process of the domination of capital over labour seems to be absolute and so does not apparently imply the possibility to overcome this situation in terms of the collective actions of the workers. Instead, they seem to be under the absolute domination of capital. Therefore, what is apparent is the situation of the expression of the exploitation of labour in terms of the aims of the process of capital accumulation, but this situation cannot be changed because of the expression of what seems to be a total domination of the capitalists within the relations of production. In other words, Mckenna outlines in impressive terms the various aspects of the role of exploitation and alienation within the capitalist economic system, but this understanding does not seem connected to a strategy for trying to overcome this domination in terms of the expression of the attempt to liberate labour.

However, he does suggest that in the work of Lukacs there is a conception of the capacity of the workers to develop a consciousness that will enable them to act in a collective manner in order to transform their situation and so achieve emancipation. In other words we have to try and recognise the importance of Lukacs for elaborating a strategy of revolutionary change: “The overcoming of reification, for Lukacs therefore, is a product of the ability of the working class to theoretically and self-consciously apprehend the historical nature of the capitalist social system and its own position within it by virtue of the fact that the proletarian is the living embodiment of use and exchange value as a bearer of labour power in its commoditized form; moreover this theoretical consciousness is capable of being translated into revolutionary action by the fact that the proletariat – by virtue of the fact that the proletarian is the living embodiment of use and exchange value as a bearer of labour power in its commoditized form; moreover this theoretical consciousness is capable of being translated into revolutionary action by the fact that the proletariat – by virtue of its structural position and collective sweep – has the ability to place the totality of society’s economic organs under collective control and determine economic output in accordance with authentic human need. In this way, the proletariat abolishes reification, for it ends the social relationship of exploitation which undergirds the capitalist system – the exploitation of labour by capital – and thus ends in practice the very process which allows social relationships appear in the guise of an exchange of things. In this way, the proletariat abolishes itself as a class.” (p166-167) But the problem with this perspective is that it has not been realised, not even in limited terms. Instead the forces of capital have remained dominant over society and so if this perspective is to be credible rather than dogmatic he should attempt to establish the reasons why this approach has not been realised. Thus it is contended in a dogmatic manner that: “The workers ability to develop a revolutionary understanding of capitalism is grounded in their class position at the level of social existence, because this in turn is bound to their capacity to fundamentally transform the social mode of production.”(p168) Hence any questioning of this strategic approach is defined as a justification of pessimism about the possibilities for the workers to utilise collective action in order to transform the character of society in an emancipatory manner. But if we are to establish a credible political approach that is based on the complexities involved in trying to change the character of society in an effective and popular manner, we have to begin with the empirical fact that the capitalist class has been effective in upholding the continued domination of the present economic system. We have to recognise that the standpoint of Marxism has not been popular and influential and instead the dominant parties with the support of workers have tended to justify the continuation of capitalism. Indeed, the forces of revolutionary Marxism have been marginalised, but Mckenna seems to ignore these aspects because he instead outlines a conception of a perspective of revolutionary change as if it has popular support and is being expressed as an important aspect of social reality. But instead of this illusion the approach of principled Marxism is marginalised and does not have popular support and indeed the defenders of capitalism seem to be in the ascendency. Therefore, the actual important issue is how to develop the influence of revolutionary Marxism so that it can become able to facilitate the realisation of popular support for the aims of transforming capitalism into socialism. However, Mckenna seems reluctant to address these issues because he is content to describe what is actually an imaginary situation of a radicalised working class that has become receptive to a genuine Marxist perspective of revolutionary change. In this manner he defends Lukacs’s understanding of the working class as the subject-object of history in un-problematical terms and so does not seem to recognise that the apparent effectiveness of the forces of capital to be able to defend this system may have raised serious questions about the credibility of this perspective. In other words, Mckenna’s alternative to the apparent pessimistic accommodation of some Western Marxists to the domination of capitalism is to vaguely support a militant alternative of mass change. Hence the difficulties of this perspective are not tackled in a serious manner.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Mckenna outlines the revolutionary character of the working class in un-problematical terms. He comments: “The underlying identity of subject and object which is built into the proletariat by virtue of its socio-historical position at the level of practical existence is what creates the possibility for a self-conscious comprehension of the nature of capitalist production and from this flows the possibility for revolutionary action. Revolutionary action, just like revolutionary theory, is premised on the same dynamic – the proletariat as the identical subject-object of the historical process. The object ‘out there’ capital, the alienated labour power of the proletariat is not only manifested in the part of labour power which the capitalist class accrues in its immediacy as profit; also capital is embodied in the means of production, the tools, the machinery and the actual buildings and locations – the workplaces themselves. In the act of appropriating its own alienated labour, the proletariat must take a grass roots democratic control over all the workplaces; in abolishing the wage-labour-capital relationship the working classes place the objective totality of society’s economic organs under the subjectivity and self-conscious control of the proletariat itself in and through the creation of workers councils.”(p197) This perspective would seem to be a principled understanding of how the domination of capital is to be overcome in terms of the establishment of the popular democracy of the role of workers councils. But apart from suggesting that the workers can establish subject-object identity in this manner of their expression of collective action it is indicated in an effective manner how this process of the overcoming of the domination of capital can be realised in popular and democratic terms. Instead, what has been indicated is the apparent ethical limitations of the situation of the domination of capital over labour. This situation generates collective struggle for change by the workers. But what is not indicated is how this expression of unrest with the domination of capital can be successful. Instead there seems to be a contradiction in that the generation of unrest is the essentially inevitable result of the domination of capital over labour, but this expression of discontent may not be successful in being able to achieve effective change. Hence it is still necessary to outline a strategy that would be able to indicate in feasible terms how the process of the transformation of capitalism into socialism can be realised.

But instead of the elaboration of this strategy, Mckenna instead contends that the forces of labour are able to overcome the domination of capital because of their revolutionary possibilities. He comments: “In the last analysis, the revolutionary move of the proletariat to take over the means of production, to create workers councils which regulate the production and distribution of all social goods and services, to submit to itself the totality of the objective forms of organisation of the capitalist social system – involves reclaiming the estranged essence of its own subjectivity – the alienated labour in the form of capital. In so doing the proletariat achieves subject-object identity.” (p216-217) But the problem is that the issues involved int this question are dismissed as being unimportant or an expression of the justification of pessimism about the possibility of revolutionary change. However, we have to understand that the supporters of capitalism have been effective in their aim of defending the system and opposing the possibility of radical change. Hence, we have to understand the difficulties involved in trying to achieve social transformation in a manner that is more adequate than that provided by Mckenna. Primarily we have to understand that in the present circumstances the forces of revolutionary Marxism have been marginalised and instead it would seem that the possibility to achieve social transformation is not very favourable. Hence we have to try and develop a strategy that would enable the workers to become radicalised and receptive to the aim of attempting to transform society. But we have to understand that this development has not been realised in the contemporary period and instead the domination of capitalism seems to be enduring. Therefore, we have to start with what is an unfavourable situation and suggest a perspective that could change the balance of class forces in favour of revolutionary change. However, Mckenna seems to ignore the difficulties of this present situation and instead implies that any scepticism about the possibility of change represents the approach of pessimism. In other words, he substitutes an un-problematical conception of the transformation of society instead of a recognition of the problems involved in trying to achieve revolutionary aims.

Mckenna would contend that his apparent optimism about the possibilities of social change is based on the objective that it this aim can be realised: “In continue to believe that the solution to the capitalist riddle of oppression and exploitation in the modern world is to be found in the working class and its ability to take power in and through the control over the factories and the schools, the call centres and the shops, the docks and the offices and the workplaces more generally.”(p222) Hence he would suggest that any scepticism about this type of objective represents the views of an intellectual elite that has become pessimistic about the possibility of revolutionary change via the activity of the people. However, it could also be suggested that this type of view has been generated by the difficulties involved in trying to realise progressive and democratic radical change. The effective marginalisation of Marxism seems to have represented the problems connected to the attempt to achieve popular transformation of society via the expression of popular forms of mass struggle. Therefore instead of Mckenna’s dogmatic dismissal of the objections of various intellectuals to the prospect of the realisation of revolutionary change it would be more useful to try and provide an alternative that is connected to a recognition of the difficulties involved in trying to realise a process of change that is able to realise a democratic socialist society.

Does the attempt to elaborate this task indicate that socialism is a credible task? Selbourne would suggest that capitalism is a dominant system that cannot be overcome and replaced with an alternative. But he upholds this understanding in terms of being an uncritical defender of the system. In contrast Mckenna upholds with confidence the view that socialism can be achieved via the popular activity of the people. It is necessary to reject both of these perspectives as being an expression of dogmatic reasoning. Instead, we would suggest that the limitations of capitalism means that it is possible to develop popular support for the creation of an effective movement that could achieve radical change and so realise the aim of socialism. However, this development is not an inevitability and instead it is quite possible that the ascendency of the present system does not become undermined by the development of popular unrest. Instead, it could be suggested that the attempt to create a popular and effective revolutionary party in favour of change will continue to be successful. There is not inevitable dynamic that means that the attainment of the success of a perspective of revolutionary change will be inevitably realised. Instead, the very failures of the left-wing parties could facilitate the influence of the view that it is not possible to achieve the development of an alternative type of society. But the very limitations of capitalism could mean that socialism is possible. These issues will be discussed in more detail in additional articles about the issue of whether socialism is a credible objective.