UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF POST-WAR BRITAIN

This article will be primarily based on a critical evaluation of the analysis of Andrew Marr’s ‘A History of Modern Britain’ (Pan Books. London 2017). The basis of the critique of the approach of Marr’s work is that the standpoint of a type of liberal standpoint is not sufficient in order to understand the various class antagonisms that characterise the character of events since 1945. The major problem with the analysis that is presented is not that it is an inaccurate description of events but instead it suggests that what happened was primary an expression of the success or failure of the role of governments and elites. Thus, Marr comments: “Good people, acting honourably, failed to lead well. We have been run by cliques of right and left who did not understand the direction the country was taking…..So Labour did not build a New Jerusalem. So, the cabinets of the fifties and early sixties failed to create the restored great power…. They dreamed of. The Wilson and Heath years were supposed to be a time of modernisation, a refitted and retooled Britain. They ended with trade unions rampant and the lights flickering out.” (p. xxx) This is an indication that the only expression of the character of history in a constructive or detrimental manner is the role of political elites. The people do not make their own history only the activity of governments or the economically influential are able to define the possible destiny of the nation. There is no suggestion that the actions of the people, such as the role of the trade unions, can be anything other than negative and so not constructive and genuinely transforming in progressive terms. Instead all that is said to matter is the apparent incompetent role of elites, but: “The exceptions were the Labour government of 1945, which developed a welfare state even if it did not achieve the transformation it wanted, and Margaret Thatcher’s first two administrations, which addressed the British crisis head on.” (p. xxx) Marr does not seem to accept the importance of the different aims of these two governments, and that the Labour administration of 1945 was based on the objective of making social progress that would uphold the interests of the people. In contrast the Thatcher administration attempted to utilise the ideology of popular nationalism in order to undermine the influence of the trade unions. These different objectives were an indication of the contrasting character of these two governments. The point being made is that it is not possible to suggest that both of these governments were in some manner efficient and successful because such a vague approach ignores the different aims of these two administrations. The point is that the Thatcher government seriously undermined the role of the welfare state that had been established by the 1945 Labour government. In general Marr contrasts the apparent success story of British capitalism when compared to the role of various political administrations: “Opening markets, well-educated and busy people, a relatively un-corrupt and law-abiding national tradition, and an optimistic relish for the new technologies and experiences offered by twentieth century life all make the British experience generally better than political history alone would suggest……Yet modern Britain has made great advances in science, culture and finance which have benefitted and will benefit the world.”(pxxx1) Hence it is suggested that despite various political limitations the advances of the economy have generally outweighed these problems. But this is to deny the actual situation of the decline of the social advances of the people caused by many successive Conservative administrations and the Blair period of the Labour government. The point is that the effective decline in the influence of the forces of the organised labour movement has led to the possibility for these various administrations to be able to undermine the various social gains that had been made in previous periods. What is important to recognise is that it is the importance of the class struggle between capital and labour that has a significant influence on the character of politics. Marr does not sufficiently recognise this point because he instead defines the political system in terms of the role of elites.

Despite his important limitations Marr makes an important characterisation of the strengths and limitations of the 1945 Labour government: “The Labour government of 1945-50 is remembered today as among the greatest British administrations ever. Some of the glory is justified…….it changed the health and welfare structure of the country, nationalized sectors of the economy and managed to survive a series of terrible external shocks. But if its aim was to create a socialist commonwealth with different values and different people in charge – to make a social revolution – then Labour failed. No significant changes to the British class system came about as a result of the work of the Atlee government.” (p8) But why did this apparent outcome result? The important point to recognise is that the Labour administration was primarily committed to the introduction of the welfare state and was ambiguous about the feasibility of making advances towards the realisation of socialism. But most importantly there was not a conscious and politically astute working class which facilitate the transformation of the role of the Labour government into becoming an expression of a process of transition from the defence of the welfare state into the development of the realisation of an alternative socialist type of society. Marr indirectly establishes the limitations of the political character of the support for the Labour government in the following terms: “Marching behind them was an equally divided crowd of intellectual socialists, practical middle class people who believed in planning, trade unionists who thought it was time for the workers to get there share, and a few committed Marxists. And behind them watching, there were millions of Labour voters who merely hoped for a better life. This meant, in practice, welfare plus nationalization, a consolidation and extension of the wartime directed economy and the “fair shares” of the previous few years.”(p25) But what this comment seems to ignore is that the important sentiment in favour of change was not connected to the influence of a conception of what could be meant by the realisation of a genuine socialist society. There was a popular understanding that it was necessary to overcome the limitations of the present, but this sentiment was not connected by the Labour party to a conception of what was meant by a socialist society. In this context the limited programme of the manifesto seemed to be all that could be realised and so the aspiration for more radical change was not articulated. Primarily the problem was about how could a socialist society be realised given that the Labour government with a majority in parliament was not committed to this objective in a definite and consistent manner. Instead there was a vague popular mood in favour of radical change, but this was never articulated in a definite manner in terms of the validity and importance of the realisation of a different alternative type of society. An important problem was that the small and influential Communist party associated the concept of socialism with the authoritarian role of the Soviet state, and so in this manner the very aim of socialism acquired ambiguous connotations. It became associated with austerity economics and the continuation of rationing in the post-war period. The problem was that there was never the development of a genuine intellectual political culture which could indicate the aspects of a socialist society in a popular and effective manner. Marr does not really discuss the issue of socialism because he considers it irrelevant. Instead to him the only question of importance is the efficiency of the Labour government in a situation of continuing economic and social problems. But the actual important issue is that the Labour government lacked any conviction about its ultimate aims. The result of this situation was the disorientation of the people who could only vaguely imagine that the present political possibility of the realisation of a potential alternative to capitalism was not being realised because of the moderation of the government. Instead the Labour administration was determined to maintain both capitalism and the role of the empire. It also was an intransigent ally of the USA in the continuation of the role of what became known as the ‘free world’. Hence the Labour government was unable to promote a national and international policy that was genuinely independent of the interests of the USA administration. The major opponent was the USSR which became criticised for its support of authoritarian socialism and so the UK Labour government became a part of the defence of the interests of world capitalism despite its supposed socialist objectives. This situation was not challenged by the development of an influential and popular alternative. Instead it seemed as if the only other option was the expansion of the Soviet bloc. The forces of Trotskyism were split and marginalised and so could not present an effective alternative of a genuine socialist society. Instead it seemed that all that was possible was expressed by the politics of the Labour government despite its obvious limitations.

The point being made is not that there was a lack of elaborations of what was meant by an alternative socialist society but instead the issue of how to realise them was not being developed in an adequate manner. Instead it was assumed that at some point in the future the Labour government would act to realise the perspective of socialism. But such a development never occurred and could not occur given the limitations of the Labour party. Instead the aim of socialism was upheld by the authoritarian Communist party, and so there was no effective political agency for the realisation of the objective of the transformation of capitalism into an emancipatory society. But as Marr outlines there was one achievement which indicated the success of the post-war Labour government which was the establishment of the National Health Service which for many people provided the most adequate medical treatment compared to the limitations of the previous private based system. This measure indicated what was possible in terms of the connection of the determination of a government with the aspirations of the population. The effective creation of the welfare state was a major achievement of the Labour government and this development could have become the basis of the realisation of genuine advance towards socialism. But this was not the objective of the administration which was committed to the development of a modified capitalism which was also able to realise some of the social objectives of the people. Marr criticises what he considers to be the bureaucratic character of the process of nationalisation of industries like coal and rail, but he does not explain the reason for this development which was the lack of any genuine involvement of the workers in the management and organisation of these sectors. But the problem was that the workers lacked the perspectives which could have articulated their standpoint in terms of the promotion of the role of the trade unions in the organisation of these enterprises. The unions reluctantly accepted these developments and the issue of workers control was not advocated effectively and instead the result was the creation of bureaucratic enterprises. Marr considered that the primary problem was the lack of good management of the nationalised industries: “But the naïve idea that simply taking an industry into public ownership had been punctured early. What matters is the quality of managers” (p69) This conclusion ignores the possible importance that the development of management by the trade unions could have contributed to the organisation of nationalisation. Instead of this development the various nationalised industries were organised in a manner similar to that of private enterprise, but under the formal control of the state. This was a type of state capitalism rather than the expression of the initiative and dynamism of the workers who had no involvement in the organisation and character of their industries. In other words, the approach of the Labour government was elitist and so rejected the possible advantages of the involvement of the workers in the organisation of the nationalised enterprises. Furthermore, this development could have altered the balance of power within the economy in favour of the increasingly influence of the workers and so generated the development of economic conditions conducive to a process of transition to socialism in general terms. But instead of this development the actions of the government ensured that the nationalised industries were organised in elitist and bureaucratic terms and so became merely support industries for the promotion of the role of what was still a form of capitalism based primarily on the role of private enterprise. But the dynamism of the workers was important, as Marr indicates, in struggling for a genuine improvement to the quality of housing. This was an indication of what the determined actions of the workers could result in. But the problem was that such activity was of a limited nature and was not connected to the realisation of the genuine political power of the working class within society. Instead the actions of the Labour government were increasingly related to the objectives of supporting the foreign policy objectives of the American administration. The result of this situation was that the promotion of its reform agenda was undermined and led to the demoralisation of its supporters. In other words, the problem was the lack of a politically conscious labour movement that could have acted to facilitate the possibility that the Labour government could have acted in a more consistent reformist and left-wing manner. Instead the administration was increasingly lacking in ideas and was dependant on its support for the foreign policy objectives of the American presidency. Ultimately the major problem was the lack of an effective socialist organisation that could have created popular support for a credible programme for the advance of the objectives of socialism. Nobody made the call for the transformation of the Labour government into a worker’s government based on a programme of nationalisation in terms of the principles of workers control and the development of a principled foreign policy of non-alignment. This point does not mean that the advocacy of such a programme would be guaranteed immediate and automatic success. But what could have been created was the increased influence of a form of socialist culture that would have provided the working class with the perspectives required to make advances in the struggle for a genuine revolutionary transformation of society. But such a possibility was not advanced by the fact that the forces of authentic Marxism were small and divided into competing groups. Furthermore, these organisations did not develop the programme of socialism but were instead content to advocate merely revised versions of the Transitional Programme of Trotsky. This did not amount to the promotion of a credible programme of revolutionary change, and nor did it outline a convincing conception of the type of socialist society and economy that would be a principled alternative to capitalism.

Marr implies that the approach of socialism did not have a popular appeal because of its connection to the importance of state intervention in the economy and the development of the influence of the elitism of Labour party politicians. But in actuality the aim of socialism was never a serious objective of the Labour government which was instead content to develop a mixed economy and the introduction of the welfare state. The actual aim of this administration was to modify the activity of capitalism in terms of the interests of the people. This perspective was never seriously questioned because of the lack of the popularity of any genuine socialist alternative. In other words the actual problem was the failure of the various Marxists to outline a credible conception of the limitations of the actions of the Labour government and as a result to indicate the aspects of what would represent the aspects of a genuine socialist alternative. Instead what was more influential was George Orwell’s pessimistic understanding of the increasing realisation of the domination of forms of authoritarianism and a related view that the possibility of socialism had become undermined by the omnipotence of the influence of the role of political power of elites. Hence in these ideological circumstances it seemed that the most progressive possibility was expressed by the role of a reforming Labour government. The influence of this moderate stance was connected to the development of the cold war and the objective of socialism seemed to have become associated with the totalitarian character of the USSR. In these circumstances the understanding that socialism could be the result of the popular struggles of the people had apparently become discredited. However, despite the failure to establish the credibility of a socialist alternative the working class was able to improve its social situation via the role of trade union militancy under the Conservative governments of the 1950’s. This development seemed to indicate that the major basis for the possibility of social progress was by applying mass pressure for changes within the capitalist system that was in a period of economic boom. The major aspect of political unrest was caused by the governments involvement in the attempt to maintain domination over the Suez Canal in 1956. This situation led to mass protests but what this meant was that people knew what they were against but were not able to articulate what they supported. Macmillan came to power as prime minster and he was relatively successful as Marr indicates by promoting a policy of the expansion of the economy and de-colonisation. However, there were economic problems caused according to Marr by the increasing influence of the trade unions. He contends that it was necessary to introduce a reform programme that would promote economic efficiency and tackle the increasing problem of inflation: “If there was ever a moment when ministers could have gripped the issue of inflation and asserted themselves against the consensus of Whitehall and the unions, this was it.”(p166) But the major problem was not caused by the indecisiveness of the government and instead was related to the contradiction between the requirements of the forces of capital to maintain profitability and the increasing aspirations of the workers for higher wages. This contradiction could not be resolved without antagonising the forces of either capital or labour. Marr considers that the problem was the failure of government to introduce the necessary economic measures that could enhance the realisation of the efficiency of the economy. Instead because of indecision of the government it was unable to introduce the necessary wage restraint policy that could have encouraged the realisation of the increasing profitability of the capitalists, and so led to the enhanced efficiency of the economy. But this perspective indicates that Marr essentially supports the objectives of capital as opposed to support for the interests of labour. The point was that the workers were able to obtain higher wages because of the importance of the trade unions. However, they lacked the perspective to try and translate this influence into an objective of the attempt to realise the possibility of workers control of industry. As a result of this impasse the character of British capitalism was that of inefficiency and a lack of dynamism. The limitations of the situation could have been resolved by the advance of the realisation of the objective of workers management of the economy. But this perspective had little influence despite the growing importance of a number of small socialist organisations.

Marr suggests that the problem was the inefficiency of capitalism: “it was the structure of Britain’s working world that was the problem, not the lack of hardworking people or enterprising companies – not even at this stage, inflation or industrial militancy. On the one side, the industrial companies were dwarfed by the vast nationalized corporations, sucking capital and talent away from the consumer industries that were becoming so central to people’s lives…..On the other side, there was simply too many tiny companies, inefficiently and traditionally run without any knowledge of new management styles, product designs or marketing.”(p178-179) Thus it is being suggested that a modernisation of the forms of capitalist economic activity would have result in increased efficiency and dynamism of the economy. But the most important limitation that undermined such a development was the level of profitability that was not sufficient high to encourage the necessary increased investment and modernisation. In this context the perspective of the possibility of a dynamic modernisation of British capitalism was not likely to occur except in a few industries like the production of cars. Instead the situation was characterised by a stagnant capitalism and the increasing influence of a militant working class which had acquired confidence because of the full employment of the immediate post-war period. The actual problem was the lack of a popular perspective for the workers that could have resulted in the conscious expression of a perspective for the realisation of democratic control of industry. Instead the 1950’s were characterised by the differences between Gaitskell and Bevan over the issue of leadership of the Labour party. Gaitskell represented a policy of accommodation with capitalism despite the increased militancy of the working class, and Bevan never outlined a credible perspective for transition to socialism. Instead in propaganda terms Bevan outlined the reasons why socialism was superior to capitalism. Hence there was a situation of political malaise which Marr connects to the failure of Britain to join what became the common market in the 1950’s. Hence there was a situation of an ideologically limited working class and Labour party but also the failure of British capitalism to become dynamic because of its national insularity and the increasing inefficiency of the various enterprises. The situation could have been tragically transformed if Bevan had become leader of the Labour party. But this possibility was not released because of his tragic demise. Instead the Labour party seemed to be dominated by a collection of pragmatic modernisers. This situation was reinforced when Wilson became leader in the early 1960s. the result of this development was to undermine the possibility that the Labour party would promote left wing policies.

But the major aspect that seemed to undermine the credibility of the objective of socialism was the apparent ability of the capitalist system to provide a situation of general prosperity in the 1950’s. Such a development was unprecedented and seem to suggest to the working class that the objective of socialism had become antiquated because of this situation. The emphasis of Marxist theoreticians on the importance of the alienation generated by the capitalist relations of production did not seem to be able to provide an adequate alternative to the ability of the present economic system to be able to provide increasing material benefits for the people. But the major problem with the general Marxist approach was that the alternative of workers control of production was not emphasised, and so as a result Marxism seemed to have become an ineffective expression of criticism of the system and yet lacked a coherent and convincing strategy of the transformation of capitalism. Instead the aspect of discontent within society was articulated in cultural terms in relation to the role of critical films and theatre performances. This situation was an indication that even a prosperous capitalism could not resolve the problem of the lack of democratic control of society. However, the affluence meant that the criticism of Marxism seemed to have been resolved in terms of the increasing situation of the general satisfaction of the majority of the people with society. In this context the credibility of the aspiration for change was expressed by the increasing limitations of the Conservative governments which seemed unable to realise the raising expectations of the people. The result was the electoral success of the Labour government in 1964. Harold Wilson promoted the conception of the technological revolution in order to enhance the possibility of the modernisation of the economy and the realisation of the aspirations of the people. However, as Marr explains it was the increasing objective of the Labour government to maintain financial orthodoxy which meant that expenditure on ambitious social programmes was never realised. Instead the result of the attempt to maintain financial orthodoxy was undermined by the devaluation of the pound in the late 1960’s and this meant the government seemed to be incompetent and unable to promote economic efficiency. In this situation of uncertainty, Enoch Powell became notorious because of his conscious attempt to create racial tensions with speeches against immigration. The response of the Labour government was totally unprincipled and led to the introduction of restrictions on the right of immigration to the UK. But most importantly the forces of a left-wing character did not outline a genuine alternative in terms of the development of the reasons why immigration could be of benefit to society. This was connected to a failure to develop a conception of what is meant by a socialist society in relation to the development of advanced capitalism. Ultimately the right-wing trajectory of the Labour government was indicated by the attempt to introduce ‘In Place of Strife’ or an attempt to establish restrictions on the actions of the trade unions. But this approach was ultimately rejected because of the indifference of the Labour cabinet and the objections of the trade union leaders. Marr summarises the apparent failure of the Labour government in the following terms: “The great background question about the Labour governments of the sixties is whether with a stronger leader they could have gripped the country’s big problems and dealt with them. How did it happen that a cabinet of such brilliant, such clever and self-confident people achieved so little”(p311) But the actual problem was not about confidence and determination but instead referred to the complexities involved in a Labour government managing a capitalist economy. The economically orthodox actions of the administration indicated that the attempt to introduce measures that favoured the interests of the working class was becoming increasingly undermined by the apparent constraints of financial orthodoxy. This meant that what occurred was the creation of an increasingly right-wing government that was alienating its working- class support. But this discontent did not result in the development of a credible alternative conception of the transformation of society. Instead what had resulted was the beginning of an acute problem of political perspectives for the Labour movement concerning how it proposed to modify capitalism in a more left-wing manner. The result of this situation of political disorientation was the election of a Conservative government.

However, in a promising manner this period was also one involving the improvement of the politics of socialism. The Institute of Workers Control was established in this period and this promoted a perspective of the importance of the realisation of workers control of the economy as the prelude to the realisation of a genuine and democratic form of socialism. What was lacking was the connection of this objective to a credible strategy for the realisation of these aims. However, the introduction of the anti-trade union legislation of the Conservative government indicated the relationship between the development of the struggles of the unions against these measures to the realisation of the possibility of the objectives of the Institute for Workers Control. For the first time what was being developed was a credible perspective of the realisation of popular change by the workers, and this approach could be connected to the discontent of the trade unions caused by the government legislation. Bu this development was also undermined by the popular nationalism caused by the realisation of Britain’s membership of the European Common market. The Labour party adapted to this nationalism but adopted the policy of calling for a referendum on the issue of Britain’s membership of the Common market. But the left wing of the Labour party adopted the mistaken approach of calling for opposition to the UK being in the Common market in any possible referendum and so prepared the basis for an opportunist alliance with the right wing of the Conservative party. Hence this adaption to nationalism undermined the contrasting development of a viable strategy for change represented by the perspective of workers control. However, to some extent these problems were overcome by the success of the militant struggles of the working class, such as the occupation of the Upper Clyde shipyards which directly raised the issue of workers control, and the militant struggles of the miners in 1972 and 1974 which undermined the authority and credibility of the government. Hence the very importance of the mass actions of the workers indicated the potential for the realisation of a different economy based on the importance of the influence of the producers in the organisation of the economy. But the problem was that the influence of the approach of workers control was still not popular, and instead the potential of these mass actions was not essentially realised in terms of the attainment of genuine workers control. However, the militant action of the miners did help to end the domination of the Conservative government as a result of an election caused by their strike. But the problem was that ultimately the militant action of the workers could not express a principled alternative to the prospect of a new Labour government. The perspective of workers control had nothing to suggest concerning attitudes about elections and so the influence of this standpoint was both limited and ultimately ineffective. In this context it seemed that the only alternative was to support the re-election of a Labour government. Hence the ultimate problem for the supporters of genuine socialism was that whilst they had developed a credible strategy of change, they were unable to generate popular support for this approach. Instead the Union leaders cooperated with the Labour government in the introduction of the policy of wage restraint called the Social Contract. The limited influence of the working class on the actions of the Labour government was expressed by the role of the trade union leaders. However, the forces of the left wing of the Labour party undermined their credibility by collaborating with the supporters of right-wing conservative nationalism in the referendum campaign concerning the membership of the UK in the European Common market. There was no effective left-wing articulation of the reasons that might favour the membership of the Common market by the UK. Instead this accommodation to right wing nationalism was an expression of the limitations of the forces of the left wing of the Labour party and the failure to develop a genuinely internationalist conception of the argument in favour of socialism. Instead it was argued in vague terms that the basis of the prospect of socialism would be connected to the assertion of the role of the nation state. The relationship of internationalism to socialism was not being made in any effective and principled terms. In this context the approach of workers control was conceived as an economic doctrine that was not related to these important political issues.

Marr describes the process of transition from the Wilson to the Callaghan premiership as an expression of continuity: “by the standards of New Labour after 1997 this was still a left wing government, keen on redistribution, still describing itself as socialist, levying high rates of income tax. It believed in nationalisation, adding shipbuilding, the new oil industry and the aircraft manufacture to the state’s bulging holdings, and in such anti-privilege issues as the abolition of pay beds in the NHS.”(p365) But as Marr also indicates the Labour government also accepted to introduce deflationary measures in return for a loan from the International Monetary Fund. The result of this development was cuts in public expenditure which led to strikes by workers with the result that a Tory government was elected. Marr is assuming that the militancy of the workers was counterproductive because it only resulted in an outcome that was detrimental to its interests. But the actual problem was the isolation of the various groups of public sector workers who went on strike. They were unable to influence the actions of the Labour government which was intent on the introduction of a deflationary policy that could only result in the undermining of the credibility of its intention to create a fairer type of society. This situation indicated that the Labour government of the late 1970’s was undermined by the demands of an economic system that was entering into a situation of crisis. The only option was to implement the measures of deflation advocated by the IMF or alternatively to promote a more expansionist and left-wing approach. In this situation the Labour government accepted the objectives of a deflationary approach and so discredited itself. It seemed that it was no longer possible to promote the aims of the progressive development of the welfare state because of the increasing problems of the world capitalist economy. However, the left wing of the Labour party was not powerful to try and generate the necessary support for an alternative. In this situation of crisis and the apparent lack of credibility of the Labour government it was not surprising that the Conservatives won a general election.

Marr suggests that the unpopularity of the Conservative government for promoting deflationary policies that led to increased unemployment was not serious because of the crisis in the Labour party and the limitations of the new leadership of Michael Foot, and the fact that the popularity of Labour was undermined by the increased influence of the Social Democratic party. But Marr is right to suggest that the situation was transformed by the Falklands war between the UK and Argentina. The point is that an appeal to popular nationalism was an indication that this sentiment was very influential because of the limitations of the approach of the Labour party which capitulated to the mood of national chauvinism. Serious opposition to the war was limited to the minority of committed socialists and the result of this development meant that the Conservatives could appeal for support on the basis of nation against the alternative of a class viewpoint. But in actuality this generation of popular nationalism was important for maintaining the domination of a Conservative government despite its measures of deflation and the effective creation of mass unemployment. This situation also indicated a serious crisis for the Labour party which was unable to provide a political alternative because it was also based on an emphasis on the importance of the so-called national interest. The only contrasting standpoint of a genuine type of internationalism and unity between the people of the UK and Argentina was never advocated in any serious manner. Consequently, the appeal of nation, as defined by the Conservatives, proved to be ideologically effective and helped to ensure their continued electoral success. The failure of the Labour party was expressed by its inability to connect its objectives to the only principled alternative of internationalism. This limitation was an expression of the inherently nationalist character of the reformism of the Labour party. But also left wing supporters of the Labour party like Tony Benn failed to elaborate a conception of socialism connected to internationalism. These problems indicate some of the serious limitations of the ideology of the Labour left which generally attempted to uphold a strictly national conception of left-wing politics, such as support for import controls. Only new developments would pose the possibility for the revival of the influence of socialism.

This possibility was expressed by the miners strike of 1984-85. The development of this militant and popular action indicated a genuine opposition to the domination of the government and the potential to achieve significant advances in the class struggle and the possibility to undermine the credibility of the Conservative government. But Marr considers that the interests of the miners were undermined by the intransigence of their leader Arthur Scargill who rejected any possibility of compromise with the government: “The political force ranged against the miners in 1984 was entirely different from the ill-prepared, Heath administration they had defeated ten year earlier. A shrewder non-revolutionary leader would not have chosen that fight at that time or, having done so, would have found a compromise after the first few months of the dispute. Today there are only a handful of thousand miners left of the 200,000 who went on strike.” (p416) This view implies that a compromise was possible. But the government did not want to resolve the dispute in these terms. Instead they insisted on the realisation of their aims of the closure of many pits. In these circumstances of the development of a serious expression of class struggle the aim of the supporters of the miners should have been to promote the aim of the development of a general strike. But the influence of this perspective was not developed in any effective manner and instead the Trade Union Congress was able to effectively undermine the credibility of the miner’s strike. The defeat of the miners meant that the balance of class forces favoured the interests of the capitalists. Furthermore, the perspective of union militancy had become discredited because of this defeat of the actions of the miners. Marr blames the dogmatic and intransigent leadership of Arthur Scargill for this situation but actually it was the determination of the Conservative government that proved to be superior when compared to the popular militancy of the miners. There was plenty of popular goodwill shown towards the miners, as expressed by the various forms of charity support, but this was not translated into effective generalised action by the trade unions. The result of this defeat meant that the general interests of the working class were undermined and instead the enhanced power of capital over labour was realised. The ultimate failure was that of the lack of leadership of the Trade Union Congress which refused to advocate any form of effective solidarity action. It was not the apparent dogmatism of Scargill that was the primary problem but instead the opportunist character of the TUC.

However, the defeat of the miners meant a serious realisation of a balance of class forces against the working class. This meant the Conservative government could realise forms of privatisation of most of the nationalised industries and utilise tax revenue from North Sea Oil in order to finance its programme of de-industrialisation. The aim of the Conservatives seemed to be directly political. To create an economy based on the interests of finance capital in which the interests of the working class was undermined. The limitations of the Labour party leadership of Neil Kinnock meant that this reactionary perspective was never directly challenged. Instead Kinnock was more concerned to oppose the influence of ‘Militant’ within the Labour party. He became more popular by criticising its leadership of Liverpool city council. But Kinnock was unable to win general elections. The political supremacy of the Conservatives seemed to be invincible. But then they made an important mistake by introducing the so-called Poll tax. This was an attempt to increase the number of people, those on low incomes, who had to contribute towards the finances of local government. This resulted in the development of popular opposition which is outlined by Marr. But what he does not explain is that this situation led to the important leadership role of Militant in the organisation of the anti-poll tax campaign. For the first time in the post-war period a Marxist organisation became important in terms of becoming the leadership of a genuine mass movement. But the problem was that they did not connect the objectives of this mass movement to the aim of overthrowing the hegemony of Conservative governments. Instead the aim was limited to an end to the Poll tax. Therefore, given the limitations of this campaign it was possible for the Conservatives under the new leadership to be elected in relation to the promise to end and replace the Poll tax. As Marr comments: “On 9 April 1992 Major’s Conservatives won 14 million votes, more than any party in British political history. It was a great personal achievement, also based on people’s fear of higher Labour taxes. It was also one of the biggest percentage leads since 1945, though the vagaries of the electoral system gave Major a majority of just twenty one seats.”(p486) This outcome was an indication that despite the apparent success of the anti-Poll tax campaign the ideas of conservatism had become hegemonic in popular terms. In a particular manner the view that Conservative governments had become typical and could not be challenged in electoral terms had acquired apparent credibility because of this process of continual electoral success. Hence the Tory government was not undermined by the development of popular discontent but instead economic problems that led to the view that its administration had become inefficient. The result of this situation was the election of a Labour government under its most right- wing leader Tony Blair. This development expressed a serious crisis for the credibility of the socialist project because there seemed to be no credible agency for the promotion of the realisation of the aim of socialism. The Labour party had apparently explicitly rejected socialist aims and it was implicitly considered that the working class had become right wing and populist and so no longer receptive to the socialist message. It seemed that the various forces of the Marxist Left were split and ineffective and so no longer able to act in any effective manner to promote an alternative of genuine socialism. Hence the situation seemed to be that the pragmatism of the Labour government had become invincible and there was no opposition to its right-wing politics. However, the support of the Blair administration for the US governments invasion of Iraq led to popular mass protests in the UK. Marr outlines: “In February 2003, as British and US forces waited to attack Iraq from the South, there was a vast ‘Stop the War’ march through London. It was the biggest ever demonstration in the capital, a carnival of protest that put even the Suez protest in its shade.”(p565) Furthermore the Socialist Workers party established its political influence in this situation by becoming the effective leadership of the ‘Stop the War Coalition’. This opposition was supported by people like Robin Cook wo had resigned from the government in protest. But the problem was that the government was determined to continue its support for the actions of the American administration despite the mass protests. So, the anti-war campaign had to adopt a long-term strategy of opposition to the promotion of militarism by the UK and USA governments. But this is not what happened in any effective manner and instead what was essentially a single-issue campaign went into decline because of its ultimate lack of success. This development was connected to the failure for any revolutionary organisation to make a credible argument in favour of the necessity for socialism in order to realise international peace. Instead the very activism of the various Marxist groups led to the lack of credibility of their politics because what essentially occurred was the lack of success of the anti-war objectives. Furthermore, the various campaigns knew what they were against, which was the military intervention, but could not connect this objective to the development of a credible conception of how peace could be realised in more effective terms. The very activism of the Marxist groups was the ultimate cause of their political limitations and the failure to develop more long-term and mass support. What was not being promoted was a message of the necessity to realise peace via the successful attempt to establish international socialism. Instead the very pragmatism and activism of the Marxist groups meant that they could not sustain their momentary popularity. Ultimately the issue that was problematical was the failure to elaborate a convincing conception of what was meant by socialism in the era of contemporary capitalism. The tendency for activism only intensified the seriousness of this limitation. Increasingly most people no longer understood the political role of the Marxist groups. This situation was only made worse by the continual tendency of the Marxist organisations to split into smaller groups. In these circumstances there was no actual consistent left-wing opposition to the politics of the Blair government. Marxism was in a serious crisis despite the obvious limitations of a right-wing Blair administration.

The increasing decline of the labour government led to the election of a new Conservative administration. It introduced a policy of austerity which led to the opposition of the trade unions. This development could have led to the revival of the labour movement but instead the leaders of the unions increasingly adapted to the economic and political situation and so demobilised their members and accepted austerity despite this resulting in a low wage economy. It was the policy of the Conservative government that led to a situation of crisis when a referendum called about the membership of the European Union led to a majority of voters calling for rejection of the involvement of the UK in the EU. This development was an expression of the alienation of the working class from the political process and the related generation of support for a right-wing type of populism. It could be argued that this development contrasts with the election of a genuinely left-wing leader of the Labour party in Jeremey Corbyn. But the popularity of the Labour party leader was seriously tested in the recent December 1919 election which led to overwhelming support for the pro BREXIT leadership of the Conservatives by Boris Johnston. This outcome was an indication that the influence of left-wing ideas was of a secondary significance when compared to the resurgence of a type of nationalist populism that had led to the triumph of the Conservatives on a BREXIT policy. The result of this situation was that Corbyn had to resign as leader of the Labour party and the right-wing pragmatist Kier Starmer won the election to be the new Labour leader. It seemed that the approach of a left-wing type of Labour party politics had ultimately failed because of the more powerful attraction of right- wing populism. The left wing of the Labour party has become marginalised and it seems that the very principles of socialism lack credibility under these circumstances. But these developments only indicate that it is necessary to theoretically tackle the issue of how to make a genuine type of socialism credible. This will require important study and understanding of how to effectively oppose the rival influence of the approach of a populist nationalism which has been utilised by the Conservatives in effective terms in order to generate their present political dominance.

However, most of the Marxist groups are in a situation of denial about the necessity to tackle the challenges posed by the present situation. Instead of acknowledging the importance of the influence of populist nationalism within the working class they instead in a dogmatic manner call for the development of new mass struggles which presumably will create the influence of socialism in popular terms, or for the struggle to re-establish the influence of the left wing of the Labour party. What is not understood is the necessity to develop a conception of socialism that can be convincing to people who have little knowledge about what this aim means. This means re-developing the ideas of the Institute of Workers Control about the importance of workers management of the economy and the elaboration of a strategy by which this aim can be realised. The point is to indicate that the approach of populist nationalism is an alienating ideology which cannot result in the genuine realisation of the ability of people to be able to define the character of their social activity. However, it would be a complacent error to suggest that this task will be simple, and which can guarantee immediate success. Ultimately the credibility of this perspective will depend on whether it can motivate people to act in order to realise it and in this manner challenge the domination of capitalism. The approach of socialism has to become more credible than the influence of the populist nationalism which is being utilised to maintain the political domination of the contemporary Conservative party. This prospect is being made more complicated by the fact that the Conservatives led by Boris Johnston are not reticent about using public expenditure in order to promote the credibility of their policies. The era of austerity seems to be coming to an end and it is because of the non-dogmatic actions of the contemporary Conservatives. This aspect has to be understood because rejection of what is occurring in social reality will not make socialism a convincing alternative. Instead we have to outline credible reasons why and alternative to the domination of capital over labour is possible. Ultimately it has been the failure to outline an effective conception of what is meant by socialism in the modern era of capitalism has meant that the influence of bourgeois ideology has remained dominant. Ultimately the activism of the various Marxist organisations has meant that they have neglected to address these important theoretical issues and instead considered that a type of activism is sufficient in order to create the development of an adequate form of revolutionary consciousness. But this approach has failed. The Marxist groups will be acting more effectively if they elaborated a strategy of revolutionary change and connected this to a credible conception of socialism. This development will not ensure success, but it will mean that the groups can offer a convincing alternative to the influence of populist nationalism which has led to the domination of the Conservatives in the recent period.