

## Citation metadata

Author: Bellamy Foster  
Date: Mar. 1988  
From: Monthly Review(Vol. 39, Issue 10)  
Publisher: Monthly Review Foundation, Inc.  
Document Type: Article  
Length: 7,090 words

## Main content

Article Preview :

It may seem strange that Henry Ford, an automobile manufacturer during the early decades of the twentieth century who died in 1947, should suddenly become a major source of contention among those interested in analyzing the contemporary crisis of the U.S. economy. The last few years, however, have seen a vast expansion of the Ford legend, particularly by thinkers working within the left, who have elaborated a whole new mythology of "Fordism," intended to sum up the political, economic, and cultural development of twentieth-century monopoly capitalism. Nowhere is this fetish of Ford and the ism now attached to his name more obvious than in Michael Harrington's latest book, *The Next Left* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986). Just prior to the First World War, Harrington tells us,

Henry Ford anticipated John Maynard Keynes. Or perhaps he borrowed from Karl Marx, who predated Keynes in some of his insights. Mass production, Ford said, requires mass consumption, which means higher wages. Belatedly--in fact, after the families of workers striking against his company were massacred--John D. Rockefeller agreed. Indeed, this strange history is so important that . . . I call the economic, social, and political transformations of the thirties and forties, "Fordism."

For old Henry Ford had grasped something profound and the Great Prosperity had acted on his wisdom, even if against his will and without knowing too clearly what it was doing. He deserves to have an age named after him, because he, rather than Keynes or Marx, predicted what happened: not simply high wages and a modicum of decency for workers, but those things in order to expand the power of corporate America.

In short, Harrington would have us believe that Henry Ford--despite his notorious antiunion stance and his opposition to the New Deal, etc.--envisioned a new, corporatist age of high-wage, high-consumption, easy-credit and highproductivity capitalism, based on the firm foundation of the mass production assembly line. And that it was the widespread implementation of "Fordism" in this sense in the 1930s and 1940s in response to the Great Depression, its further extension in the 1950s and 1960s during the "Great Prosperity," and its eventual demise in the "slow 1929" of the 1970s and 1980s, that explains the entire history of the last half century or more.

Nor is Harrington alone in advancing such views. Similar arguments are presented in Mike Davis' important new book, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (Verso, 1986), and in the outpourings of the entire "regulation" school of French political economy, associated with the names of such thinkers as Michel Aglietta and Alain Lipietz.(1) In this view, such key features of the contemporary political economy as scientific management, the modern regulatory environment, Keynesianism, and the "welfare state" are all partial manifestations of a larger institutional structure called "Fordism" that arose out of an "historic compromise" between the contending classes in advanced capitalist society.

Indeed, the current conditions of economic stagnation that date back to the early 1970s are, in the minds of these theorists, largely an expression...

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Foster, Bellamy. "The fetish of Fordism." *Monthly Review*, vol. 39, no. 10, Mar. 1988, p. 14+. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

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