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 Lipletz.(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...
Fordist mode of growth became dominant in advanced capitalism during postwar reconstruction and is often credited with facilitating the long postwar boom. 3. Mode of Regulation: comprises an institutionalized compromise between organized labor and big business; monopolistic competition between large firms; centralized financial capital, deficit finance, and credit-based mass consumption; state intervention to secure full employment and establish a welfare state, and the embedding of national economies in a liberal international economic order. Post fordism allows different parts of a whole to The Fordist technological revolution. In this sense the Fordist fragmentation of tasks and standardisation of components introduced a new flexibility to the labour process which was the condition for technological dynamism, and so the culmination of the penetration of capital into production. To avoid needless repetition the point probably needs to be emphasised once and for all: „Fordism“ broke down what had been an extremely rigid technology, and an equally rigid organisation of the labour process, into its component parts, in order to reassemble it according to the principles of its own rationality. Under Fordism, mass consumption combined with mass production to produce sustained economic growth and widespread material advancement. The 1970s-1990s have been a period of slower growth and increasing income inequality. During this period, the system of organization of production and consumption has, perhaps, undergone a second transformation, which when mature promises a second burst of economic growth. This new system is often referred to as the “flexible system of production” (FSP) or the “Japanese management system.”