It is in the context outlined above that Toyotism and the age of flexible accumulation emerged in the West. From the 1970s on, what was contingently expressed as a crisis of the Taylorist/Fordist accumulation-pattern was already an expression of a structural crisis of capital that continues to the present day. It resulted in the implementation of a vast process of restructuring aimed at re-establishing capital’s reproductive cycle and a project of social domination that had been shaken by the confrontation with labour.

Capital launched a number of transformations to its productive process through the establishment of flexible forms of accumulation, downsizing, forms of organisational management, technological advance, and alternative models to Taylorism/Fordism, particularly Toyotism, or the Japanese model. These transformations, deriving from inter-capitalist competition, on the one hand (at a time of intense crises and disputes between the large transnational and monopolistic groups), and, on the other, from the necessity to control social struggles emanating from labour, began to invoke capital’s response to its structural crisis.

Against the resistance emerging from social struggles, capital initiated a process of reorganisation of its forms of social domination, not only reorganising production but also attempting to recover its hegemony in the most diverse spheres of sociability.
It did this, for example, on an ideological level, through a cult of subjectivism and extreme individualism above forms of solidarity and collective and social action. Ellen Wood argues that it is a phase in which economic transformations, changes in production and markets, and cultural shifts – generally associated with ‘post modernism’ – were in fact the expression of a moment of maturation and universalisation of capital, much more than any transition from ‘modernity’ to ‘post modernity’.¹

However, these changes, which began in the 1970s and are, to a large extent, still under way, generated more dissent than consent. According to some scholars, they were responsible for the establishment a new form of industrial organisation and capital-labour relations that offered an improvement over Taylorism/Fordism because it enabled the entry of a more qualified, participatory, multifunctional, versatile worker, able to attain a ‘greater degree of achievement in the workplace’. This interpretation, which originated in Sabel and Piore’s work (1984), was popular with many other observers who, more or less closely aligned to the thesis of flexible specialisation, defended the so-called ‘innovatory characteristics’ of a ‘new phase’ of improved interaction between capital and labour able to overcome the basic, constitutive contradictions of capitalist society.

According to others, the transformations were not leading towards a ‘Japanese’ or ‘Toyotisation’ of industry but were instead simply intensifying existing trends and did not indicate a new form of organisation of labour. On the contrary, in the context of advanced-capitalist economies, what could be perceived was a reconfiguration of ‘balance of power in the workplace and in the labour market in favour of employers rather than workers’.²

For Tomaney, who offers a critical examination of the tendencies described above, new research, particularly in England, reveals that the thesis of a ‘new organisation of labour’, bestowed with a ‘new optimism’, is being disproved. The changes that are affecting the world of labour, especially on the ‘shop floor’, are the result of historical and geographical factors and not simply the result of new technologies and the process of organisational development.³ In his critique of the theory of flexible specialisation, he shows that ‘it is possible to identify three greater sets of problems’: ‘firstly, the utility of the dichotomy between mass production and flexible accumulation; secondly, the inability to account for the results of the process of restructuring and deal with its political implications; lastly, the fact that, even where it is possible to identify

¹. Wood 1997a, pp. 539–40.