

Cloudy, with sunny intervals

Political Studies Association Annual Conference
London School of Economics, 10–13 April 2000

The organizers of the PSA's fiftieth annual conference noted the appropriateness of choosing the LSE as its venue, since the Association had been founded there. Perhaps they also reflected on the appropriateness of hosting a conference whose theme was 'The Challenges for Democracy in the 21st Century' in an institution whose director, Anthony Giddens, is allegedly Blair's favourite intellectual. Certainly the Third Way themes of modernization and cosmopolitanism were prominent, not only in the panels and papers but also in the conference organization itself. Everything here was bigger than ever before – more panels (some fourteen at once) and round tables, more graduate participants, more days of conferencing (four), more hours each day (from 8.45 a.m.) – while the organizers' enthusiasm for technology was evident in the impressive website.

The conference was also postmodern, at least in its fragmentation. Scattered across various buildings, with participants flung across a variety of accommodation sites, incorporating no meals within the conference fee and substituting the Web for a papers room, it lacked any real centre and thus the sort of camaraderie (and networking opportunities) which usually marks these occasions.

Yet, cynicism aside, the conference did sometimes seem genuinely exciting. There was evidence of a profound and informed scepticism regarding Blairite democratization in Britain, both in terms of its constitutional reforms and its commitment to social inclusiveness, coupled with a surprisingly widespread willingness to question the boundaries and sites of the political itself. People, it seems, really are disillusioned with political parties and the state, while members of the discipline seem finally to accept that all sorts of political interventions transpire which they might previously have dismissed as extra-political or merely cultural. There was also a welcome recognition that democratization is not confined to Britain or the West, with a range of more international panels featuring eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Political theorists have traditionally felt marginalized by the legions of political scientists at PSA conferences, but there were a significant number of theory panels among the 150 or so this year. Certainly, these still bore the stamp of the enduring paradigms within Anglo-American theory, where titles alluding to impartiality and discursive democracy displayed the imprint of Rawls and Habermas, whose work still enframes the ongoing debate of how to achieve consensus within diverse populations. Having rehearsed the necessary background, however, speakers were often openly critical of these discourses and looking for something new. Far smaller, but nonetheless encouraging, was the number of panels under the aegis of the Poststructuralism and Politics specialist group. There were also no fewer than four panels on 'British Idealism and Democracy', but this seemed mainly to reflect the zeal of their organizers. There was a single panel on 'Aesthetics and Politics', focusing primarily on Benjamin, but nothing else on the early Frankfurt School. It was notable how little the history of political thought featured. There were panels on utilitarianism and Marx, two on Hegel, but nothing on ancient or medieval thinkers.

Despite the dismal weather, the pessimistic prognoses for democracy, the gloom induced among political scientists by the imminence of quality assessment, and the dearth of opportunities for collective merrymaking, in the end this was a successful conference.

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