The future of post-socialism

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This article discusses three contributions to new thinking on the Left. Two of these, Anthony Giddens's *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* and David Miliband's collection *Reinventing the Left* (to which Giddens contributes the first chapter), set out to provide the new thinking which the post-Clause 4 Labour Party certainly needs. *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, by Ralph Miliband (Miliband père), defends traditional socialist positions against facile revisionism, as its author did throughout his working life.

The most theoretically ambitious of these works is that of Anthony Giddens. It is a prolegomenon to a political programme, somewhere between a theoretical framework and the specific policies it might generate. ‘A Future for Post-Socialism’, one might say. This book was originally announced in 1981 under the title ‘Between Capitalism and Socialism’. It was going then to combine the project of realizing still-valid socialist ideals with confronting the ‘absences’ in Marxism and in actually-existing socialism: the role of violence, military power, ethnic and sexual exploitation. But Giddens’s thinking has moved on. Now he says socialism is virtually moribund and looks to a post-socialist and post-capitalist perspective, as if the enemies confronted by these old ideologies have vanished into thin air, or, more precisely, into cyberspace.

**Giddens's sociology of modernity**

It is useful to see *Beyond Left and Right* in the context of Giddens’s two decades and more of theoretical work, the underlying coherence of which is now made clearer by its political application. To begin at the beginning, in *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971) Giddens drew a contrast between the work of Durkheim and Marx on the one hand (historicist, systemic, and naturalistic in their ethics in grounding immanent or emergent values in positive theories of social development), and Weber on the other. Weber’s voluntarist action-based methodology then become one foundation of Giddens’s own approach. The separation of fact and value became the grounding of an ‘ethical’ view of politics, and its rejection of determinism and economism was the basis for Giddens’s critique of historical materialism. There is an affinity between the theoretical preference for ethical over materialist approaches shown by Giddens and the ethical view of socialism now proclaimed by the Labour leader.

In *The Class Structure of Industrial Societies* (1973, revised edn 1981) Giddens demonstrated the distinctive insulation between political and economic spheres which he held, following Weber, to be the defining attribute of capitalism, later of capitalist democracy. This argument supported Giddens’s view that capitalism should be understood as a distinctive system with its own laws of development, not as a mere stage in an evolutionary schema to which universal explanatory laws (e.g. of historical materialism) applied. The distinction between political and economic spheres became a basis for Giddens’s institutional pluralism, since it denied the causal priority of any one (e.g. material) sphere. This led Giddens on, in *The Nation State and Violence* (1985), to the exploration of the means of violence and surveillance as modern forms of social domination and threat. Critical attention to the role of the state has, of course, had a central place in ‘revisionist’ social theory of the left (in the work of Mann, Parkin, Skocpol and the later E.P. Thompson, for example). It made possible a full confrontation with the oppressiveness of state socialism. Giddens has continued to see the state as an ambiguous force, sometimes oppressive, sometimes emancipatory.

In parallel with this work on the institutional dimensions of society, Giddens also devoted much

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attention to the subjective and intersubjective dimension of 'action'. What is meant by 'action' in the sociological lexicon are the dimensions of understanding, rule-following and decision-making which constitute individuals' relationships to society. Here, in his notably syncretic way, Giddens has drawn on the work of phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists like Schutz and Garfinkel, and post-structuralists – especially Foucault – to explore the different ways in which cultural systems can be constraining of individuals, and yet, in other conditions, the objects of individual reflection, choice and decision. His concept of 'structuration' enabled him to theorize the idea that individuals are both made by and the makers of social forms; necessarily so, since the means by which societies reproduce themselves require that individuals and groups have to internalize the rules by which their own lives are lived. But the processes whereby individuals learned these cultural scripts always allowed some scope to redefine and reinterpret them as they did so.

This more methodological turn took place in a series of works beginning with New Rules of Sociological Method (1976), and continuing with Central Problems of Sociological Theory (1979) and the very substantial The Constitution of Society (1984). These works attempted a new synthesis of sociological theory, the aim of which was to transcend – through the concept of 'structuration' – the antitheses of 'structure' and 'agency', 'system' and 'action', 'micro' and 'macro' sociology with which sociological theory had been left at the end of the long debate between functionalists and interactionists. Both structuralism and phenomenology, though antithetical to each other with respect to individual agency, enabled Giddens to clarify that, in drawing on implicit social rules in routine social action, individuals were reproducing and instantiating a social order which had often been wrongly misconceived in positivist sociology as 'external' to them. Giddens sought to replace the concept of 'dualism' (the supposed antithesis between action and system, individual and structure) with the idea of 'duality of structure', the argument that individuals were both independent of and yet also utilized the normative resources of the social groups to which they belonged. Structuralism contributed to this understanding through its cognitively and linguistically elaborated version of the social system; phenomenology and ethnomethodology through their view of social action as an intersubjective construction of meanings which both drew upon and enacted implicit social norms.

Giddens argued that the understandings of social scientists were intrinsically part of this perspective. To produce useful accounts of the social world, social scientists need to be able to understand actors' own definitions of the situation. (This is another continuity with Weber.) But in a 'double hermeneutic', as Giddens called it, sociologists' understandings were liable to be reincorporated into social life, thus modifying the thinking and behaviour of actors, and incidentally maintaining the quality of social life as an open, underdetermined system. This (at least theoretically) interactive relationship between sociological thinking and actual social life is one reason why Giddens should still be seen as a 'critical theorist'. He believes that social theory is emancipatory in so far as it thus enables actors to redefine their situations and see new possibilities for choice.

This reformulation of the grammar of sociological explanations might not have amounted to much in practice, except that Giddens linked this redefinition of the relation between social actors and social structures to a substantive theory of historical change. This asserts that the scope for 'reflexive' understanding has undergone a secular increase with the development of 'modernity'. Actors' relationships to social structures have been theoretically recast as 'recursive' (structures are always and only reproduced through actors' understandings and practices). But what does change over time is how much must be taken as given, and how much can be reflected on by actors. Evolutionist models, rejected in their deterministic, positivist, and materialist forms, thus make an indispensable though covert return in Giddens's theory of 'dismembering' and globalization. According to Giddens, these processes have the effect of enhancing reflexivity. What was historically a mainly 'dualist' relation of individuals to unchangeable facts and traditions now becomes more of a 'duality' as it becomes possible for citizens to reflect on alternative definitions of the real and the normative. A mainly coercive relationship between actor and structure thus evolves into a more voluntaristic one. 'Modernity' is defined by this change in the relations between actors and structures. In effect we might say that duality of structure becomes defined as the modern condition, dualism as pre-modern.

Giddens arrives at this conclusion both through his abstract arguments about 'the constitution of society per se, and through discussion of contemporary institutional forms and social processes, in A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Volume 1 (1981) and The Nation State and Violence (1985). (Beyond Left and Right was originally conceived as the third volume of this trilogy.) In these books he argued for the centrality to social theory of the concept of power and began the elaboration of its different modalities, which, in his view,
should displace the mode of production as the main principle of social classification.

Giddens’s argument remains, however, on a fairly abstract plane. In *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* he distinguishes between allocative and authoritative resources, thus providing the conceptual resource for giving due weight to the power of the state as well as the power of capital in the development of capitalist and other forms of society. He sees changes in the boundaries of time and space over which power was exercised as the key dimension in historical change. A general concept of enhanced powers of various kinds is developed, with application to military, bureaucratic, economic, and informational resources. *Different epochs, different modalities of power,* is Giddens’s and Mann’s essential neo-Weberian argument, in contrast to the Marxian view which sees epochs as always dominated by transformations of the mode of production. This pluralization of forms of power allows Giddens to identify three main ‘axes of exploitation’ distinct from that of class, and to give these equal priority with it. These axes are exploitative relations between states, between ethnic groups, and between the sexes. These dimensions of power are taken up in programmatic terms in *Beyond Left and Right.*

But Giddens’s idea of duality of structures leads him away from these conventional ‘external’ descriptions of the institutional ‘containers’ in which power is located. Power ceases to be defined largely as a coercive or instrumental relationship based on the interests of different actors (Giddens rejects this particular Weberian idea) and becomes instead an internal relation between actors and structure. As Mouzelis points out, internalization replaces compliance (in a covert convergence with functionalist thinking) as the primary form of relation between individual and society. The effect of this is to weaken the concept of power and make conflict difficult to conceptualize.

Power becomes redefined not as the influence of one actor upon another, or of structures upon actors, but as a general process of the overcoming of boundaries of time and space. In pre-modernity, actors are largely confined within such boundaries, or embedded within local and time-bound traditions and meanings. The processes of ‘modernity’ subject people to influences (whether economic, coercive or cultural) which transcend these time–space boundaries.

Giddens shifts the idea of the influence of one society upon another from the specific institutional modalities of military conquest or colonial exploitation to the more abstract register of ‘time–space edges’, the juxtaposition of the more with the less modern. A kind of evolutionism, that of the enhancement of powers to transcend time and space, is imported covertly into his argument, just as earlier materialist and positivist forms are being dismissed. This leads him to the view that in the conditions of modernity, reflexiveness has become a universal possibility. This idealist perspective – that every aspect of nature, society and identity becomes in principle available for reflexive choice – then informs the political approach of *Beyond Left and Right.*

His model of transcendence of time and space boundaries allows Giddens to generate concepts of ‘globalization’ and ‘reflexivity’. These are more-or-less opposite sides of the same coin, since men and women who are no longer confined within the conceptual limits of a bounded region of time and space become free, or at least are forced to define themselves more autonomously and reflexively as individuals. (*Fundamentalism*, in *Beyond Left and Right*, figures as a defensive or retreatist reinvention of tradition in response to the anxieties of this situation.)

What has been accomplished here is a reinvention of the sociological concept of modernity and thus, in its historical narrative, modernization. This is a new version of the strategy followed by sociologists of the classical period (Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Tonnies et al. between 1870 and 1920) in their attempts to provide an alternative, reformist and pragmatic model of social evolution in competition with Marxism. There, too, a process of rationalization, abstraction and universalization of hitherto tradition-bound and local social practices was elaborated. Where Marxism placed
emphasized the cultural and normative sphere as the location of the crucial changes. ‘Modernity’ implied a contrast, with pre-modernity, traditionalism or backwardness. Whilst ‘modernity’ was recognized to have its practical problems and ethical dilemmas, it was viewed essentially as an end-state, not as a stage of transition to something else. What this conception abolished, in effect, was the idea of a necessary historical struggle with and transcendence of capitalism. One might say that this was always the ideological project of academic sociology in its rivalry with Marxism.\(^ \text{10} \)

In fact, Giddens’s approach is even more resolutely normative and culturalist in its explanatory stress than the classical sociology of modernity. This is an effect of the ‘linguistic turn’ in social theory which he has followed in his incorporation of structuralist and phenomenological ideas into his theory of action. Connected with this is his emphasis on surveillance, information-processing and the ‘disembedded’ forms of discourse which have become pervasive in the world. ‘Reflexiveness’ becomes the new basis of utopian possibility, arising from the detachment of individuals from given structures and from the possibility of arriving through dialogue at fresh social definitions and understandings.

Recently, in Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (1991) and The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies (1992), Giddens has become interested in the intra-subjective aspects of identity, shifting his attention from the dialectical interaction between individuals and society to the self-construction of individuals themselves, through the exercise of what he calls ‘reflexivity’. To explore these dimensions of what he calls ‘self-identity’, Giddens has drawn attention to the prevalence in ‘advanced’ societies of psychotherapeutic discourses, as vocabularies of self-construction and reconstruction. His emphasis on the idea of ‘reflexivity’ as a kind of unencumbered capacity for self-understanding and choice leads him to prefer the rather depthless formulations of cognitivist psychotherapies, not to say do-it-yourself counselling manuals, to the theories which postulate a more intractable human nature. The concept of the ‘pure relationship’,\(^ \text{11} \) which he sees as an emergent possibility of modernity, would seem to a psychoanalyst unrealistically omnipotent in its denial of the unconscious sources of emotional identification and attachment. Where Giddens takes an interest in psychoanalytic writings, his leanings are, consistently enough, towards the more cognitively oriented American ego-psychologists. Giddens is antipathetic towards all conceptions of constraining limits to choice, whether these are set by the unconscious, by material forces, or by social structure itself.

This recent interest in issues of identity and reflexivity also had its parallels in the earlier development of the sociological theory of modernity. Among the earlier generation of sociologists of the transition, Simmel (upon whom Giddens draws widely) came closest to Giddens’s later conceptions of ‘individualization’ and ‘reflexivity’. However, Simmel’s sense of the force and necessity of ‘the social’ as a reality \textit{sui generis} led him to a balanced view of what individuals’ freedom from the bonds of social membership might amount to, as it did Durkheim. Retracing these classical steps, Giddens now also finds himself concerned with the problem of threatened social solidarity, of how to repair and maintain social structures in which individuals can have adequate trust. For Giddens, as for his classical predecessors, ‘disembedding’ is not without its risks. Giddens has also in effect retraced the paths of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology in their earlier attempts to theorize the spaces available for identity-construction within a more open social order.

Especially important to Giddens is the enhanced role in society of the means of communication and information. These are major agencies in the processes of globalization, individualization and reflexivity. The ideas of time–space distanciation and disembedding derive their everyday plausibility from images of instantaneous global communication flows. Giddens’s utopian model of ‘reflexivity’ might even be regarded as an ‘ideological’ effect of the underlying power relations within an unequal system of communication, in the way that the idea of freedom of contract was for Marx an effect of the unequal relations of capital and labour.

Scott Lash and John Urry’s recent \textit{Economies of Signs and Space} explains the main dynamic of ‘disorganized capitalism’ as the development of the means of information and communication, as the major dynamic of ‘organized capitalism’ in the past was the mode of material production.\(^ \text{12} \) Giddens does not choose to formulate the issue in terms of the modes of communication and information, even though to do so would identify a domain of power which needs to be confronted from a democratic standpoint. The reason is that a formulation of social changes in terms of the replacement of material production by information would retain a neo-Marxian theoretical framing. The ‘mode of information’ might even be deemed to be merely a variant and more advanced ‘mode of production’ within capitalism, even if dis-organized or
differently organized, and thus to require little substantial change in the theoretical scheme at all!

Giddens incorporates the role of communication and information into his theory in a different way, through a lexicon of globalization, disembedding, ‘detraditionalization’, time–space distanciation, and reflexivity. These concepts, consistent with his ‘structuration’ approach, theorize the social process from the point of view of how it bears on and transforms the experiences of individuals. The essential argument is that social relations which were formerly contained within tight spatial and temporal boundaries increasingly break free from these. Abstract, impersonal meanings and values (of science, markets, human rights) replace local and traditional norms and meanings. Just as the ‘power containers’ of city-states once gave way to the power container of the nation-state, so national boundaries are now permeated and invaded by many forces – economic competition, mass communication, shared cultural aspirations – which nation-states can no longer control.

Households and factories, for example, which previously contained spheres in which stable power relations of domination or equilibrium existed, are now reshaped or disrupted by forces acting from a distance. Zones of temporality are similarly disrupted, as, for example, young men in Indian villages who may never have had unsupervised contact with a young woman outside their family can now watch highly sexualized American MTV programmes beamed by satellite to the local bar. ‘Detraditionalization’, the ‘disembedding’ of life patterns from their moorings in local, first-hand experience, takes place as alternative versions of experience become available on a basis of virtual simultaneity. The most ‘advanced’ life-forms of California, if one can call them that, become as vividly present in the lives of people worldwide as what happens next door. The reality of present and remembered experience competes with the virtual realities transmitted by the world communication system.

This widening scope and velocity of information flow was one of the main factors which undermined the control of Communist elites in the USSR and Eastern Europe, sometimes, as with glasnost, by choice of their own leading reformers. Gorbachev seemed to have had a better understanding of the ‘post-industrial’ means of information than he did of ‘industrial’ means of material production.

In general, Giddens’s sociological theory minimizes the inevitability of constraint, whether of social structural, unconscious or material kinds. Both from methodological principle, and in his assessment of the current evolution of ‘reflexive’ forms of social relationship, he gives weight to the new potentialities for enhanced freedom and choice. Nicos Mouzelis, in a telling article, has criticized Giddens for blurring the differences between ‘dualism’ and ‘duality of structures’, and for confusing those situations where individuals are in effect constrained merely to reproduce institutional rules and norms, with those rarer contexts where more powerfully placed individuals are able to challenge, question and modify institutional practices both for themselves and for subordinates. Mouzelis also points to the importance of collective actors, combining together in order to act from below, as well as hierarchically placed actors, empowered to act from above, in the monitoring and modification of institutional rules and practices. There is more than one form of relation to rule systems, and the differences between them are politically vital, Mouzelis points out.

Something similar may be said of relations to the means of information and communication, which plainly do not empower all citizens equally, and whose ‘globalizing’ effect is in part to impose a hegemonic consumerist view of the world on all who are exposed to them. One might view them as a distinct and concentrated form of power, linked closely to private capital and to states, and themselves requiring a democratic political response.

Turning a blind eye

Beyond Left and Right sets out to develop a political agenda from these theoretical foundations. Giddens’s work provides one rationalization for the shift from a materialist, economistic and class-based conception of socialism on which the Labour Party is now well and truly embarked. As there are many forms of power, it is assumed that there is no reason to give special priority to the limits imposed by capital. The space Giddens accords to reflexivity, and its ensuing preference for dialogue and process over plans and outcomes, gives a theoretical legitimacy to New Labour’s ethical and idealist discourse. The causal indeterminacy of this analysis at many points, and its undue level of abstraction, also provides policy-makers with a distinct freedom to interpret these realities as seems expedient at the time. Idealism and ethics, in this system, may all too easily translate into pragmatism and getting by. The fact that New Labour is reluctant to outline specific policy objectives, for fear of compromising its electoral chances, now maps on to this theoretical indeterminacy, in a worrying way.

However, Beyond Left and Right does locate itself in relation to the four main sectors or levels of society which Giddens has analysed in his social theory, although these
are unfortunately placed in no particular causal hierarchy or definite relationship to each other. (Giddens’s pluralism, unlike Weber’s, here reproduces the indeterminacy of classical functionalism.) These are capitalism, industrialism, the means of violence, and the means of surveillance. In each he sees major dangers and pathologies, and each generates a counter-position or potential, from which a radical programme can be derived. The operation of capitalism, or the global market, generates a tendency towards economic polarization. The appropriate response is to develop a post-scarcity economy, in which less priority is to be given to production and more to post-industrial values. Industrialism, formerly seen largely as a means to overcome scarcity, is now defined as a prime source of ecological risk. The appropriate counter to these risks is the idea of a ‘humanized nature’, in which societies take responsibility for the consequences of their technological interventions. The surveillance system threatens to deny democratic rights. Giddens’s response is to propose a ‘dialogic democracy’, in which citizens become more directly involved in decisions about their lives, in work and neighbourhood as well as at the larger political level.

Technologically developed means of violence threaten nuclear and biological destruction. In response, Giddens calls for forms of ‘negotiated power’, lodged in international forms of cooperation. Concepts of ‘active trust’, embodied in the informal sector and in voluntary organization, and ‘generative democracy’ (as a way of improving on formalistic democracy) are emphasized, as concomitants of ‘reflexive’ social awareness and the recognition of the importance of self-understanding and deliberation.

Giddens identifies some modes of politics which he now considers irrelevant. The distinction he draws between ‘capitalism’ and ‘industrialism’ prizes apart the combined capitalism–industrialism antagonist of the socialist tradition, and suggests that different agencies of change are needed to combat these separate forms of power. Giddens notes uneasily that ‘the globalizing of capitalist economic relations would seem on the face of things to leave large business corporations in a dominant position within the economies of states and in the world economy as a whole.’ But this does not generate the antagonistic political focus one might expect, since ‘the demonizing of large corporations, so popular among some sections of the left at one time, does not make much sense now.’ The discrediting of state socialism, and the deficiencies of Western welfare institutions, lead Giddens to scepticism about state power, and encourage his search for new forms of cooperation and social action.

It is as if, in Giddens’s view, the earlier, organized forms of domination have melted into thin air. Traditional kinds of social democracy (and, a fortiori, Communism) are criticized for not recognizing that these earlier forms of organization and control have virtually lost their importance. In a familiar replay of recent revisionist critiques of the ‘old Left’, Giddens argues that many of its values and attitudes (productionism, familism and statism, for example) are now part of the problem of domination, not a solution to it. The book’s title, Beyond Left and Right, is to be taken seriously. He accepts from market theorists like Hayek the critique of the very possibility of planning, or what he calls the ‘cybernetic control’ of complex systems. Devolution and decentralization, whether in the forms of the market or of local deliberative democracy, need to replace the aspiration to hierarchic forms of control.

The advocates of a reformed Labour Party constitution have proclaimed that they wish to move British socialism to an ethical foundation, away from its earlier materialist basis. Giddens’s programmatic position is both ethical in its form and post-materialist in its content, to the extent that Giddens seems not to think that ‘socialist’ remains a useful term.
His argument that a ‘post-industrial’ society is more concerned about post-material values and environmental risk than it is about problems of scarcity enables him to propose highly idealist solutions to the problems of inequality and polarization. For example: ‘a generative model of equality, or equalisation, could provide the basis of a new pact between the affluent and the poor. Such a pact would be an “effort bargain” founded on lifestyle change. Its motivating forces would be the acceptance of mutual responsibility for tackling the “bads” which development has brought in its train; the desirability of lifestyle change on the part of both the privileged and the less privileged; and a wide notion of welfare, taking the concept away from economic provision for the deprived towards the fostering of the autotelic self’ (p. 194). The idea of consensual ‘pacts’ looms large in Giddens’s programme. There should also be one between the sexes. Such negotiation is the means by which international conflicts are to be solved.

Giddens calls his approach “utopian realism”. His post-materialist contrasts startlingly with the dominant value-system of what has been one of the most materialist phases in British political history. The Conservatives still place their political hopes, after all, not in ‘a pact between the affluent and the poor’, but in further reductions in taxation. As new mood-music for the post-Conservative era, and as a way of displacing attention away from awkward material claims, post-materialism and a new ethical consensus may have some ideological potential. But it hardly corresponds to the state of Britain today.

This post-socialist analysis, in both the theoretical form it has been given by Giddens and in its marketed version as New Labour image-making, has a quality of ‘turning a blind eye’ to problems and realities to which no one currently has a solution.\(^{15}\) The most important of these remains the control and ownership of capital, and its embodiment in large-scale private property. These categories are largely absent from Giddens’s discussion, in this book as elsewhere. Because even some multinational corporations suffer a loss of power through ‘globalization’, it is inferred that power itself has dispersed or evaporated. But the fact that markets and capital flows have escaped from the control of governments, or even of specific corporations, does not mean that private capital has dematerialized. It does not cease to have effects because it is less visible or less spatially embedded.

Why do revisionist thinkers seem so reluctant to acknowledge that this remains the central issue of power distribution? The agency of accumulation of capital continues to drive the process of economic polarization and ecological damage, all the more dynamically through its transcendence of spatio-temporal limits and zones of resistance. The ‘disembedding’ of capitalist systems is not equivalent to their disappearance or abolition. This idea is akin to the proclamation of the end of classes by ‘new radicals’ in Britain at the very moment when the New Right were triumphally celebrating the reascend-ance of the bourgeoisie.

One reason for ‘turning a blind eye’ may derive from a reluctance to acknowledge the existence of problems to which there are no immediate solutions. To displace the agenda on to some other topics, where political progress may be made, and some solutions may be found, gives an impression of optimism, even if it also tacitly colludes with a lasting political defeat. This is one explanation of the rewriting of the Labour Party’s constitution.

Clause 4 expressed in a memorable way a historically important idea: that until there was some form of shared or equal ownership of the main means of production, justice and democracy were unattainable. It gave expression to a philosophical view, the essence at the time, of democratic socialism. Whatever revision Clause 4 may have needed (because of its implicit statism), the problem it identified seems to have lost little of its validity, on a global scale. But so pragmatic and present-oriented has modern politics become that it seems to be impossible to tolerate a disjunction between the truthful statement of a problem and the absence of an immediate solution to it. The very idea of long-term aims, not capable of immediate fulfilment, has been abandoned, perhaps as part of a general rejection of evolutionist approaches.

However, there is another reason for the evasion of the central problems posed by capitalism, by both the author of Beyond Left and Right and New Labour. This is that their main intellectual antagonist remains at this point not the Right, or the market, but the vestiges and survivals of ‘old Left’ thinking. It seems that an earlier progressive project must be completely dismantled and disclaimed before a new one can be put forward with any confidence. After all, what does ‘New Labour’ mean except not Old Labour? This version of ‘episodic’ or ‘discontinuist’ politics, to use Giddens’s theoretical terms, can be destructive of thought. One of the losses from the death of the former Labour leader John Smith is that, though a moderate, he seemed to have a greater regard than his successor for the continuity of socialist tradition. Unfortunately, many of the problems raised within the old socialist agenda remain relevant, so a programme whose main object is to avoid them risks virtual nullity.

In his acute response to Giddens’s opening chapter in
Reinventing the Left. Perry Anderson asks where the lines of conflict are drawn in Giddens’s perspective. Politics is usually about interests and power, about friends and foes, he observes, and a politics which ignores these dimensions in favour of an exclusive reliance on dialogue is liable to be ineffectual. This is the central problem with Giddens’s programme, and it derives from his theoretical idea that the moment of reflexive rationality has arrived. To suppose that ‘pacts’ between rich and poor, men and women, rich and poor countries, can undo all these manifold inequalities of the world is to substitute idealism for political reality.

The antagonism inherent in the power of private capital is not the only one to which both Anthony Giddens and the New Labour programme turn a blind eye. One should take an equally robust and hard-headed attitude to the other forms of institutional domination that a pluralist analysis properly identifies, and construct programmes to reform them in democratic and egalitarian ways. It is not that one does not see the relevance of the ‘life-polities’, ‘active trust’ and ‘generative (i.e. deliberative) democracy’, or does not wish to see a new radical agenda which includes these dimensions. But these goals will require contests for power and depend in each case on the construction of definite political forces to be realizable.

‘Post-scarcity’ values depend implicitly on the growth of the new modes of information and communication to generate their active constituencies. ‘Reflexivity’ is a product of education and cultural diversity, as well as of social dislocation. Perhaps reasoned, informed solutions to problems have become more ‘normative’ for those groups for whom high cultural resources are facts of life and occupation. But if this is to make sense not merely among the new professionals of Islington or Cambridge, such resources – education, public-service broadcasting, information highways – also have to be fought for. ‘Reflexivity’, or deliberative democracy, requires a new distribution of powers, which has to be won from existing hierarchical institutions. This would be a desirable outcome, but it is not yet our condition.

One can illustrate this problem with reference to what Giddens has to say about welfare. He proposes a more active, ‘generative’ welfare system, with greater diversity, autonomy and collective self-help, against a merely bureaucratic conception of the welfare state. These ideas have some base in reality, in more complex life cycles, demands for a high quality of experience at each stage of life, greater autonomy for women, even greater ‘reflexivity’. There are now more self-active voluntary organizations and social movements, which have partly displaced class parties as political agencies.

There is more autonomy in public-service provision, in part as a by-product of internal markets in education, health and welfare. The ideology of individual rights, so actively promoted as a form of possessive individualism by the Thatcherites, has undermined structures of deference and status in ways that could even have some democratic benefit. Giddens’s specific ideas for more empowering kinds of welfare at different points in the life cycle, for example, and for more flexible approaches to retirement, are often interesting, and more of them could be developed within this perspective.

But more diversity and choice cannot be the whole story. Without sweeping compulsory insurance schemes, or universal entitlements funded from taxation, such ‘pluralized’ systems merely become generators of inequality, means by which the better-off can escape from the limitations of state provision, whilst leaving others even worse off than before. Without a strong conception of common citizenship and entitlement, the idea of diversity of provision will be a source mainly of greater social division and marginalization, as it is already becoming.

It is important to question power wherever it is concentrated, whether in the market, the state, or the means of surveillance, but it does not seem that a coalition for reform can be built unless some more general sense is made of the main sources of inequality, injustice and turbulence. In our world, the concentration of private capital and the unrestrained operation of markets are the main agent of this kind. One can see why, in the present ideological climate, New Labour is reluctant to breathe a word of this – the rewriting of Clause 4 was a promise never to do so again. But in the long run, it will only lose from such a silence. One cannot build a constituency for radical change if the single largest force standing in the way cannot even be named.

Perhaps politicians have to operate within the realm of the possible, but it is the role of intellectuals to keep in the public mind those powerful realities which may not be immediately amenable to remedy. An ‘ethical’ politics which does not take account of such realities is not likely to be guided by an ethical compass for very long. Nor can there be ‘reflexivity’ unless the social world is made transparently available to reflection.

Other reinventions and reminders

In the introduction to his edited volume of essays, Reinventing the Left, David Miliband says that Anthony Giddens’s chapter provides the foundations for the analytic work pursued throughout the book. Miliband has recently gone from Labour’s think-tank, the Institute of Public Policy Research, to Tony Blair’s office, so there
is reason for viewing these arguments as significant to new Labour thinking.

The collection pursues the implications of these ideas for different areas of policy, although, in the New Labour style, it offers few detailed policy proposals as such. There are chapters, each with brief commentaries, on democracy (by David Held and Anna Coote), on equality and difference (by Elizabeth Meehan and Raymond Plant), on ethnic differences (by Tariq Modood, with a comment on the positive value of religious differences by Bhikhu Parekh), on Europe (by David Marquand and Jos de Beus), on socialist parties (by Manuel Escudero and Margaret Hodge), and on the environment (by Stephen Tindale and Susan Owens). These give substance, with varying degrees of clarity and connectedness, to the areas posed for programmatic clarification by Miliband's and Giddens's introductions. There are also major chapters on economic and welfare issues.

Miliband claims that his contributors agree on four fundamental themes: 'that the left's traditional emphasis on the value of equality and solidarity needs to be supplemented by a renewed commitment to personal autonomy'; 'that it will be through the integration of public action and market decision, rather than their counterposition, that the social interest will be best secured'; 'that while conflicts in the workplace are a central feature of capitalist societies, politics is defined by relations of power beyond the labour process as well as within it'; and that there is 'the need to overcome traditional roles of political organisation both within and beyond the nation-state. The value of politics lies in the process as well as the result; democracy is an end in itself, as well as a means to an end.'

Miliband writes that the purpose of the comments which follow each chapter is not to 'deconstruct the argument of the chapter, but instead to take forward some of its ideas, as well as to introduce new (though related) ones'. Fortunately, the text does not bear out this aspiration for perfect harmony. A number of the commentaries, from Perry Anderson's onwards, take issue with some of the main arguments of the book.

For example, Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streeck argue a case for what they call productive solidarities: the idea that the Left must save capitalism from itself in the post-Fordist era just as it did previously during the period of Keynesian Fordism. The Left should offer to demonstrate the need of training, social insurance, infrastructure, equalization of costs and effective supply are met, needs which businesses cannot meet by themselves. This is to offer a bargain in which a left government will take on the role of collective capitalist, negotiating various benefits of relative equality and democratization in return. Yet Robert Kuttner points out, 'capitalism has a long history — some would say a logic — of tolerating arrangements which are far from optimal for the economy or the society but which are convenient for owners of capital. And as long as flagrant crisis is averted, the system marches on.' The system suffers not at the level of the productive economy, but of the society, through violence, poverty and unemployment. The connection of these problems with the economy may be too indirect for the owners of capital to seek a different bargain, especially as they can often insulate their lives from these problems. Most large corporations opposed President Clinton's health-care plans, even though they would have reduced company costs, because they disliked the notion of an extended role for government. Kuttner argues that the need for a politics of the demand side, based on the power of the trade-union movement and the state, is undiminished, and indeed necessary to realize the programme that Rogers and Streeck propose.

Gordon Brown argues a revisionist case which downgrades productionism, state ownership and the expropriation of capital. Because knowledge may now be more important to the economy than access to capital, it now matters more to enhance the value of labour than to expropriate capital. This is one basis for Labour's emphasis on education and training. Anne Phillips, in her comment, states some sympathy with Brown's aim of empowering individuals to improve their position in the labour market — accepting as facts of life the occupational slots which the labour market generates, and seeking to improve mobility between them — but she also notes that without state intervention to change these slots, by means which go beyond training and education (for example, through paid leave for carers, and reduced working hours), many will remain trapped at the bottom of the labour market, their potential unfulfilled.

Gosta Esping-Andersen's chapter is based on his comparative study of welfare systems. He accepts that Fordist welfare systems have met insuperable fiscal and demographic problems. The United States model of low wages, minimal welfare, and low unemployment surmounts the problem only at an unacceptable social cost. The German solution of high wages and welfare payments succeeds only at the expense of excluding many, especially women, from the labour market, and keeping them in domestic servitude. A solution lies in developing a post-industrial family and life cycle, in which the objective of the welfare system is to support a more flexible and mobile relation to the labour market. Such a welfare system will generate low-paid work (especially for women), will invest in human capital, and
will support access to the labour market.

Esping-Andersen makes optimistic assumptions about the high rate of upward movement out of the low-wage roles of the service economy. Only if these are valid would his labour-supply model lead towards social justice. Frances Fox-Piven dissents. Any welfare system, she says, will strengthen workers’ bargaining position in the labour market and make them more reluctant to accept low-paid or dead-end work. The contradiction between the demand for protection from the insecurities and hardships of the labour market and the norms of the market are inescapable and need to be accepted, even exacerbated, by the Left. There is no alternative but to accept this conflict of interests, and to seek to win support for greater social protection. This is the most intransigent defence of social democracy in the collection. It is interesting that the two most radical critiques of New Labourism, by Fox-Piven and Kuttner, come from North Americans.

It follows from these critiques (Will Hutton and Margaret Hodge provide others) that some more radical strategies are needed to supplement these plans to enhance mobility and the value of human capital by ways which presumably are not thought to involve a significant redistribution of resources (since none is mentioned). One starting point might be the idea of a new ‘social contract’ in which the opportunity or right to work is exchanged for the heightened obligations and responsibilities of which Tony Blair has recently spoken.

However, the concept of a contract would acknowledge the existence of structured social conflicts and admit the need to abate the power and rights of capital in the public interest. This is a topic about which New Labour is now most reluctant to speak. There is much that is interesting in its new political discourse, but its effect is to mystify these fundamental cleavages.

The old cause

Ralph Miliband’s Socialism for a Sceptical Age is a book in a different register. It reaffirms his lifelong view of the damaging and unstable nature of capitalism, his confidence in the mass opposition which capitalism must generate to itself, and his continuing faith in the possibilities of a socialist alternative. Ralph Miliband died between the completion and publication of this text, so it is the last political statement of one of the foremost advocates of democratic socialism.

On the whole, the book is most convincing in its critical opening chapter, where it sets out what continues to be wrong with capitalism. It is important that such realities are not glossed over in the cause of electability or of reducing any uncomfortable gap between perceptions of the actual and the possible, but what is surprising about the main programmatic sections is how far an author whose first distinctive contribution was the critique of ‘parliamentary socialism’ remains bounded by the perspectives of electoral politics. Miliband’s prospect of socialism is conceived as the eventual achievement of a socialist majority in parliament and its enactment of a legislative programme. Of course, he envisages this being supported by the democratization of economic and social institutions and by the mobilization of mass support. Nevertheless, it is winning a parliamentary majority and electing a government which is key to the project. This is in marked contrast to a sociological perspective, like that of Giddens, which sees changes in society and culture as formative – and national political struggles as secondary – means to shape and regulate these forces.

Since winning a parliamentary majority for a socialist programme now seems as remote a prospect as mobilizing the man in the moon, this conventionally political focus gives a somewhat unrealistic quality to Miliband’s proposals, even though he takes into account most of the problems that socialists have learned to acknowledge in recent years – the dangers of neglecting civil liberties, bureaucratization, the pathologies of state socialism, and so on. Readers may ask: what is the value of a detailed programme which is not going to be implemented in the foreseeable future? Miliband’s answer to this would have been, I think, consistent with his lifelong political practice. He thought it vital that there should be a principled socialist opposition, in whatever circumstances. The programme of this book probably had the main purpose of sustaining this oppositional commitment and the sense of rational possibility on which it depends. Manifestos can be valuable in more than one way, as intellectual platforms for minorities, even if they can’t always be mandates for governing majorities. Ralph Miliband accepted the necessity of the long haul. He would have welcomed the end of Conservative rule, but he would have remained vigilant towards its successors.

Notes

1. Giddens points out that the concluding section of Crosland’s The Future of Socialism, in which he discusses how people might develop fulfilling lives in a socialist society, is disconnected from the rest of that work (Beyond Left and Right, p. 77). Giddens’s project is to make central, issues of life-politics which for Crosland were an afterthought.


3. ‘The proposition that socialism is moribund is much less controversial now than it was even a few short years ago’ (Beyond Left and Right, p. 8). This is a curiously oblique way of stating a view.


6. ‘The reflexivity of modern life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character’ (The Consequences of Modernity, Cambridge, Polity, 1990, p. 38).


9. Globalisation can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant social localities in such a way that local events are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’ (The Consequences of Modernity, p. 64). A term closely related to reflexivity, and connected to globalisation in the same way, is ‘individualization’. Although Giddens’s emphasis on ‘life-politics’, ‘self-actualization’, ‘pure relationships’, etc., incorporates much of the sense of ‘individualization’, he does not use this term. It is, however, a major concept for Ulrich Beck, whose work is close to Giddens. See U. Beck, Risk Society, London, Sage, 1992, and U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order, Cambridge, Polity, 1994.

10. This was the argument of Göran Therborn in his Science, Class and Society, London, Verso, 1976.

11. ‘Pure relationship: a social relation which is internally referential, that is, depends fundamentally on satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself’ (Glossary, Modernity and Self-Identity, p. 244).

12. S. Lash and J. Urry, The Economies of Signs and Space, (London, Sage, 1994) significantly advances the ideas of their previous The End of Organised Capitalism (Cambridge, Polity, 1987). Whilst the earlier book concentrated on the break-up of the earlier forms of ‘Fordist’ system, the later work theorizes the role of the mode of information and communication in constituting a new global system.

13. I owe this example to Jess Hall.


17. For example, a property-owning democracy would not be such a bad thing if everyone owned the property, and if the governance of corporations reflected the interests of all their various stake-holders – employees, those who hold shares through insurance and pension funds, consumers.