New Left and New Labour

Modernisation or a new modernity?

Geoff Andrews

Geoff Andrews looks at New Labour's identification of modernity with managerialism and argues that the New Left tradition offers more hopeful approaches.

Recent attempts to understand the provenance of New Labour, as well as arguments over its underlying dynamics, its political orientation and its future prospects, have made connections - not all of them accurate - with the traditions of the New Left. The main point of comparison is the primacy given to modernisation as the organising framework - indeed raison d'être - for New Labour's entire existence. From its inception New Labour has shared with the New Left the need to break free from labourism, to resituate its 'project' within the fundamental changes characteristic of late modern societies, notably the need to come to terms with globalisation, the restructuring of work and family life and the implications of technological shifts. This links it in particular with Marxism Today's 'new times' analysis, where many of these developments were seen to herald a whole set of new political 'settlements'. Indeed, for many, Marxism Today was the leading intellectual influence on New Labour. For Jonathan Freedland, the former had a 'parental' role in shaping the upbringing and development of the latter (Guardian, 9.9.98), while Stuart Hall has
New Left and New Labour

acknowledged that Blair was the 'Marxism Today candidate' (New Statesman, 5.12.97). For more vigorous sympathisers of the current government such as Democratic Left (DL), there is a relatively clear and unambiguous line of continuity between 'new times' and the Blair agenda. Moreover DLs recent adoption of the term 'modernising left' - 'on-side, but not always on message' - has reinforced this connection, as well as delineating the political boundaries between those 'modernises' who accept in principle the main elements of New Labour's programme, and those 'traditionalists' who still cling to the past. The trouble here, of course, is that 'modernisation' and 'New Labour' remain synonymous; the space in which to articulate an alternative view of modernity becomes increasingly difficult to find. Such a task, however, which this journal in particular has set itself, will become more important as the faultlines emerge.

It is not only the Marxism Today heritage - what I have called the third moment of the New Left - that has been associated with the development of New Labour modernisation.1 More general similarities have been observed, in the common concern of New Labour and their New Left predecessors with the role of intellectuals, the need for long-term strategy, and the turn towards civil society rather than the state for solutions. For many, greater liberalisation and multi-culturalism is seen as the realisation of the liberal values of the 1960s, while the need to democratise and modernise state institutions also has its origins in the earlier New Left political generations. In one of the most interesting arguments in this respect, Michael Kenny suggested in this magazine three years ago (Soundings 4) that Blair's attempt to depart from Labourism mirrored in many ways features of New Left anti-statism, particularly through attempts for renewal through a deeper and more energetic engagement with the movements and currents in civil society. He traced the development of similar positions through the New Left thinkers, Charter 88 supporters, Marxism Today and the SDR to New Labour's commitment to 'reconnect the party to the energies and aspirations of groups beyond its boundaries'. What these currents had in common, he argued, was 'the conviction that Labour had lost touch with the real story of British fortunes in the post-war period - including the relative decline of its industrial performance, and the impact of important social changes which

Soundings

were producing identities and concerns within the social arena from which the party remained aloof. The concept of civil society was pivotal in the realisation of the New Left legacy in New Labour's reformulation of a radical programme. This included (he suggested), movements partly defined by a more 'diversified' concept of 'the political', to include 'the everyday, the emotional and the non-human environment'. The implications for policy were clear in aspects of constitutional reform, alternative ways of providing public services and more 'post-materialist' initiatives.

Kenny was writing six months or so before the election of the Blair government - a more optimistic period for many of us. His warnings at the time included the danger of the 'partnership' model 'displacing tough questions about social rights, obligations and duties on to communities which do not have the slightest chance of tackling them, without external resources and co-operation'. He also warned of the pitfalls of reverting to an uncritical acceptance of the globalisation thesis and conservative communitarian positions.

We can see two years on that these concerns, in essence about the distribution of power, and inequality between social groups, have become major faultlines in the New Labour approach. Increasingly, New Labour's version of modernisation, as it begins to unfold, appears as a conservative one. It is a top-down version, driven by new managerialist ideology, and acceptance of neo-liberal discourses of globalisation; at times it appeals as 'bottom-up', but only in populist ways, addressing its social constituencies in the language of customers or as individuals, with an unlimited capacity to achieve, if they 'work hard and play by the rules'. This sets it apart from the more critical engagement with modernity characteristic of the New Left. And this means that analogies between the two, however useful at a general level, are much more problematic, when the 'meta' political questions of class, power and structural inequality are raised. Indeed it is my argument here that the recent search for similarities is rather less useful than retaining the legacy of the New Left as an important source of critique of current government direction. Reconnecting in a creative way with the core of New Left traditions offers an alternative rather than complementary interpretation of modernisation.

What unified the New Left in its different guises was its critical interrogation

of the effects of capitalist modernisation, as the pre-requisite for creating the conditions for a more democratic, pluralist and libertarian socialism. A re-reading of the *May Day Manifesto*, for example (written at a similar point in the second Wilson government to the current time), finds some striking parallels with our own situation. In the section entitled 'The Meaning of Modernization', it argued that beneath the Wilsonite rhetoric of the 'New Britain', the discourse of modernisation opened up a perspective of change, but at the same time mystified the process and set limits to it:

Attitudes, habits, techniques, practices must change: the system of economic and social power, however, remains unchanged. Any discussion of long-term purposes is made to seem Utopian, in the down-to-earth, pragmatic climate which modernization generates. The discussion about 'modernized Britain' is not about what sort of society, qualitatively, is being aimed at, but simply about how modernization is to be achieved. All programmes and perspectives are treated instrumentally. As a model of social change, modernization crudely foreshortens the historical development of society. Modernization is the ideology of the never-ending present. The whole past belongs to 'traditional' society and modernization is a technical means for breaking with the past, without creating a future. All is now: restless, visionless, faithless: human society diminished to a passing technique. No concentration of power, values or interests, no choice between competing priorities, is envisaged or encouraged. It is a technocratic model of society, conflict-free and politically neutral, dissolving genuine social conflicts... Modernization presumes that no group in the society will be called upon to bear the costs of the scientific revolution - as if all men (sic) have an equal chance in shaping up the consensus, or as if, by some process of natural law, we all benefit equally from a rise in productivity. 'Modernization' is thus a way of masking what the real costs would be of creating in Britain a truly modern society'.

The Manifesto For New Times, written over twenty years later, adopts a similar starting-point, describing the 'enormous inequalities in income, wealth and power, with key decisions taken by a minority of international financiers and

industrialists'. The transformations it described - those associated with post-fordism, globalisation and technological change - produced 'new settlements', new 'sites of struggle', around which politics would come to be organised. It too warned of the social and economic costs of modernisation, which 'is promoting far more savage forms of social polarisation' (p34). It remained critical of the view that progressive change would emerge without any need for political and social struggle. In 'modernising' itself, the left must find a new 'division of labour between social movements and political parties, in mobilising people, expressing aspirations, challenging power and enacting change' (p364). A key question was 'on whose terms will this new era be moulded? (p36)'. The answer to this was to be found, of course, in the conflict of interests between 'progressive social forces' and big business - and there was a need to distinguish between 'conservative modernisation' and 'an alternative path to modernisation', based on humane, democratic and sustainable values.

**Modernisation as managerialism**

New Labour, in contrast to these perspectives, has a concept of modernity which appears one-dimensional, carrying all before it. It is its uncritical relationship to technocracy and managerialism that marks it out most from the New Left. It is not only the absence of a critique of the limits of managerialism that is important, but also the close parallels between New Labour's outlook and the underlying ethos of new managerialism. New Labour shares with new managerialism the obsession with achieving outcomes at the micro-level, on the principle of 'what matters is what works', where 'delivery, delivery, delivery' is the name of the game. Here, in place of ideology there is a 'can-do pragmatism' whereby sociological shifts act as the precursor to policy adaptation.' Alan Finlayson, in a recent *Political Quarterly* article (Spring 1999), has argued that it is this Demos liking for 'policy pragmatism', as opposed to the Gramscian meta-political critique of the economic and social system, which is the 'new times' legacy that lives on most in New Labour (p271).

At another level New Labour imbibes the new managerialist concepts of

---

'empowerment', where individuals, through the development of social and human capital, are 'invested in' and offered various forms of 'inclusion'. Anthony Barnett has used the concept 'corporate populism' to describe the way Downing Street treats the Government of the country: 'It manages Party, Cabinet and Civil Service as if they were parts of a single giant company whose aim is to persuade voters that they are happy customers who want to return Labour to office' ('Corporate Control', p27). The latest Annual Report, available from Tescos, confirms further this analogy of delivering outcomes and satisfying customers. The managerialism now seems to overlap with all aspects of the Government's outlook; one of the purposes of 'enabling government', according to Blair himself, is to 'help families and communities improve their own performance'. The problem here, as Wendy Wheeler has pointed out in A New Modernity?, is that 'Social relations can be loosely facilitated in any number of ways (good housing, full employment, for example), but they cannot be managed.'

A key aspect of the new managerialism is the elimination of conflict and the re-building of employee-employer harmony. The third way is derived from similar principles, and sees the end of adversarial politics, and the possibility of an all-inclusive society, based on building 'trust' at the micro-level and an 'enabling government' facilitating social partnerships at the macro-level. Where the New Left has always sought the 'systemic' context, and the sphere of meta-politics in which to situate its critique, New Labour by contrast looks to the micro, and has an unfailing belief in the possibilities of personal agency as the way out of 'exclusion'. Indeed the concept of a 'system' itself is anathema to them. Peter Mandelson found Anthony Barnett's proposal to project Charter 88's demands as a new system of government as 'sounding like Grosvenor Square' ('Corporate Control', p25).

Managers versus intellectuals
The different stories of modernity on offer are exemplified further by the contrast between the leading political players; the agents, mediators or
facilitators of modernisation. For the New Left it was the new concept of the 'organic intellectual' that was crucial. Here, the more public and political role of the intellectual as social critic was crucial in the articulation of a new 'project'. Intellectuals were defined by their public status as well as their critical functions - of seeking to inform and 'critically intervene' in key events. Despite an early rapprochement with intellectuals around the Nexus network, the Demos and IPPR input, and the 'Giddens Roadshow', New Labour has become uneasy with the concept of intellectuals. Geoff Mulgan's to some extent justified critique of the 'academicisation of left intellectuals' seemed to be extended into a dismissal of the worth of intellectuals per se. For New Labour, intellectuals, like all other public sector professionals, need to 'get real', by coming up with practical policy proposals; the broader, critical, uncomfortable questioning, so crucial to intellectual life, is no longer necessary. Indeed it is noticeable that as Nexus continues to disintegrate, there is no outcry (as there would have been a decade ago) that this was confirmation of the dearth of left thinking. Rather, it seems that Nexus was a victim of its own success; that by contributing ideas-for-policy, and providing an intellectual gloss, it has exhausted its role. Bring on the Managers.

In contrast to the intellectual, it is the manager that drives New Labour's project. As usual New Labour has done its research; managers, according to Social Trends, are the second fastest rising social group (after 'personal and protective services'); while a recent poll in the Guardian found that 66 per cent of the population define themselves as 'managers' in one form or another. Managers are at the centre, rather than the margins, in touch with the 'populist mainstream', doers rather than thinkers, pragmatists rather than ideologues. Technically trained, they offer a new rationality, and conviction in the age of disenchantment, disillusion and fragmentation. With their empiricist and pseudo-scientific directives, they project themselves as the new experts, albeit dressed in grey suits rather than white coats. With their attacks on 'professional privilege', and language of 'outcomes' and 'targets', they are the spokespeople of the new meritocratic (rather than chattering) classes.

**Agency versus structure**
New Labour has been quick to embrace new individual aspirations; it has made itself the 'meritocratic party', through its unstinting belief that
individuals, with the right education, training and work opportunities can make it. The belief in personal agency is however 'individualised' to an extent that removes any structural context. This distinguishes it sharply from the New Left's stress on agency, in which, freed from the trappings of 'economic determinism' and paternalistic statism, the capacities for 'empowerment', or greater autonomy, nevertheless rested upon the removal of socio-economic obstacles. They depended moreover on a critique of technocratic managerialism and the ends to which it was proceeding. If we take higher education as an example, it is worth remembering that the importance of transforming the value-system - the purpose as well as the nature of the institutions themselves - in order to move towards a more democratic culture was at the root of the New Left position, notably in the events around 1968. It is not surprising that adult education was also central in the work of many New Left intellectuals, for it contained not only a 'second chance', but redefined the concept of education by finding a new critical link between education values and wider societal values. In this respect, 'lifelong learning', a central component of New Left thinking, often stood in contrast to the narrow goals of the economic marketplace.

The trouble is that New Labour has moved from the - justifiable' critique of 'economic determinism', to a rejection of any structural causal factors. From a position which argued that economic or class position was not the only factor in shaping a child's educational opportunities (for example), it has proceeded to one which suggests that it is not a factor at all, certainly not when it is set against bad teaching. Perhaps the concept of 'structures', like 'systems', is a bit 'Grosvenor Squareish'. Structural explanations are also, of course, in need of a long-term perspective, carry costs and do not fall easily into populist language. Ironically, although at the micro level personal agency is everything, at the macro level there is an assumption that any capacity to shape events has been lost in the assimilation of politics into (neo-liberal) economics, leaving as a non-starter the prospect of major political change, or of offering a critical challenge to the global marketplace.

The importance of class
In his book *The Uses of Literacy*, a notable companion to Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, Richard Hoggart distinguishes between what he calls a 'good
classlessness’ and a ‘bad classlessness.’” The negative aspects included what he described as a populist ‘faceless’ culture of consumerism, while the more positive aspects included the ways in which a common culture could be developed which broke down elitism, privilege and social hierarchies and replaced them with shared aspirations and open rather than closed cultural forms.

New Labour has its own good and bad classlessness. It has helped to modernise a range of state institutions, removing privilege from the House of Lords, and tradition from Westminster and the constitution; it has encouraged the recognition of generational shifts and initiated at least the prospect of the ‘feminisation of politics’ and the liberalisation of institutions. While these reforms reflect some of the concerns of the ‘Nairn-Anderson’ (New Left) critique of the antiquarian and deferential nature of Britain’s ancien regime, they also clearly are conceptualised as being part of a shift towards a classless culture of opportunity and meritocratic achievement. The ‘paradigm shift’ from equality to inclusion is the key to this, and has helped to organise many of New Labour's policy agendas. Yet such a shift leaves issues of conflict, inequality and division untouched; it is as if these will be resolved of their own accord, or that social subjects can be ‘focus-grouped into position’. Nor does the distinction between a ‘good rich’ (Richard Branson) and a ‘bad rich’ (hereditary peers), on the basis of how the wealth was accumulated (‘hard work’ or ‘privilege’) provide an answer to major and deepening class inequalities.”

The New Left was also concerned about classlessness and, in its different moments, sought to engage with the changing contours of class politics, whether in the pursuit of a democratic culture, in its critique of the ‘affluent society’ thesis, in taking on the challenge of social movements, or its analysis of the emergence of post-fordist work systems. The New Left’s commitment to class, contrary to general opinion, remained as central in the Manifesto For New Times as it did in earlier New Left perspectives. Crucially, this wasn’t an unproblematic understanding of class; it drew on a range of perspectives which addressed the way in which class identity and class cultures were fragmenting, and the effects this had on communities, as well as the resulting changes in the relationship between class and politics. Stuart Hall, for example, writing over forty years

11. See D. Goodhart for this distinction in Prospca August-September 1999.
New Left and New Labour

ago on the emergence of mass consumption, noted the way in which transformations of class identity led to confusions over a perceived 'classlessness', and argued that capitalist restructuring brought with it different, if complex, forms of exploitation. 12 In the 1980s writers like Beatrix Campbell and Jeremy Seabrook looked at the way traditional class communities were breaking up, and at the forms of alienation and divisions that resulted; there was also, however, a recognition of the way in which communities were resisting and helping to negotiate the 'costs' of economic and social change. This was quite different from New Labour's attempts to remove the politics of class, in its own version of the classless Utopia - the imagined community of middle England, the site of the new guilt-free aspirational existence, with its unlimited ladders of opportunity. It has been left to Roy Hattersley, the voice of Old Labour, to point out the obvious: 'you only need ladders in a hierarchical society' (New Statesman, January 99).

The re-birth of the SDP?
New Labour's own idea of modernisation therefore differs sharply from the New Left's attempts to rethink modernity. Though New Labour is reluctant to draw on history' as a form of identification, there does exist an historical 'modernising' ancestry that explains much both about its development and its likely future faultlines. The parallel to be drawn is with the Social Democratic Party (SDP). All of the main political positions of the dissenters who defected from the Labour Party have been adopted by New Labour as the central planks of modernisation: reform of the Party's relationship with the trade unions; the adoption of a more pro-European position; the defeat of left activists; and the commitment to constitutional reform. Following the SDR New Labour has declared the need to 'break the mould' of British politics, to 'go beyond left and right', to move away from conflict and class and 'adversarial polities'. More than this the SDP embraced the 'middle ground' (in Bill Rogers' words); it sought a meritocratic culture, which was reflected not only in its politics but in the social composition of the party itself- almost 60 per cent of its members were from the professional and managerial classes.

For the late Raphael Samuel, writing shortly after the SDP’s formation in 1981, the SDP was a response to the crisis of traditional political parties, and a way of redefining politics in a modernised society. The SDP, like New Labour, sought to move beyond traditional class divisions and to create a new, meritocratic political culture. However, the SDP was not able to live up to its promise of a new politics, and was gradually absorbed into the Labour Party. New Labour, on the other hand, has been able to maintain its distance from traditional politics, and has been able to achieve a degree of success in the Labour Party, and in the wider political sphere.

1981, the latter's claim to modernity was projected through a relentless show of novelty and imagery; the SDP assumed itself - wrongly - to be the representatives of a new 'classlessness', offering an approach which was 'flexible' as opposed to 'rigid', 'clear-thinking' rather than 'dogmatic', and 'radical, but reasonable'. In fact, he argued, what defined its political identity more than anything else was precisely its class location: it was the party of a 'newly unified middle class', which, in its hostility to ghettoised council estates, its rejection of the culture of organised labour, and its distaste for working class habits, was 'much too fastidious to touch a man who is beery': it sought to 'abolish the working class' (Island Stories, p261). This would be the confirmation that society could be reformed without specific claims to community; Samuel described their leading members as 'educational technocrats, fainthearted feminists, career politicians... one time progressives and ideas men enjoying a second youth’... originating characteristically ... 'from nowhere', they 'positively rejoice in the absence of regional or local ties'. This, he concluded, was indicative of a 'delighted act of self-recognition by a new class coming out and discovering its common identity' (pp270, 263).

New Labour has followed the SDP in taking class off the political agenda, as if the removal of complex social polarities can be turned into targets to be delivered by the appropriate line manager (but don't ask Prescott). Its broader understanding of modernity is itself shaped by a sense of almost pre-given certainties. For too long it has got away with the view that the major socio-economic transformations and political upheavals of the last three decades lead to only one version of globalisation, only one type of welfare agenda, only one value-system. In eschewing any historical reflection, or the need to engage with the more complex cultural transformations, it will remain both conservative and short-termist, leaving unaddressed the big question of how to 'reinvent modernity' - which is the central issue for the New Left and its successors.

I am grateful to members of the Signs of the Times Group for ongoing discussions around many of the themes discussed in this article.

14- See Doreen Massey, editorial, Soundings 12, summer 1999.
The very idea that the New Labour government of 1997-2010 was some kind of left-wing project is probably the single biggest myth in UK politics. 1979 and all that. New Labour was clearly a continuation of the Thatcherite experiment, she said so herself. When Thatcher introduced right-wing neoliberal economics to UK politics in 1979 it was undoubtedly an extremist ideology. It is important to remember that the UK had been a role model to the world before Thatcher and her crew imposed this economic ideology from the extreme-right fringe, which had been forged in Latin American dictatorships. In the barren years of the 80s, when Thatcher swept all before her, Roy Hattersley's role as a shadow minister didn't add up to a row of beans. Suddenly Roy (The end of the Blair revolution, April 5) has discovered the secret formula for Labour's success at the next election. Periods of quiet and reflective government are not luxuries the Labour party is allowed. The Tory-dominated press will find controversy, real or imagined, and keep the pot boiling right up to election day. Pablo Prendergast Whitwell, Isle of Wight. It would indeed be an excellent thing if, as John Rees and