

## REFLECTIONS ON RECENT LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY

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A rather odd editorial in History Workshop 12 may **serve** as a beginning to this selective account of historical and political writing on the contemporary labour movement in Britain. The editorial's main complaint is that in trying to assess the evolution of the Labour Party in the past sixty or seventy years,

there is so little work to build on, whether as history, theory or politics. Both **Marxists** and social democrats tend to deal in timeless and specific **categories—reformism**, parliamentarism, leadership, rank and file. Little attention is paid to either of the major **transformations** which have taken place within the Labour Party and the trade union movement in various epochs and crises; or at the way in which these might relate, positively or negatively, to changing class formation and party affiliation, changes in the character of central and local government and changes in the place of Britain in the global economy (p. 1).

There is some truth in these generalisations, although the editorial as a whole suggests an ignorance both of the ways in which the historiography of any subject develops, and of what has actually been achieved in published or unpublished work. It must be realised that it is only just over twenty years ago that there began the remarkable expansion of labour-movement studies, but that even today there are still many gaps of a chronological/institutional kind. Institutional history has an old-fashioned sound for many young historians, but the point needs to be made that while the elementary ordering of fact through time is only the beginning of the historian's responsibility, such foundations are required for any intellectual enterprise in the historical field; and that, to quote the most obvious example, straightforward monographs on the history of many trade unions are urgently needed.

It is agreed that much remains to be quarried and then shaped, and that inevitably even in the short space of two decades the kind of questions that historians have asked of their materials have radically altered. But it is mostly incorrect to argue, as this editorial does, that:

The inspiration for labour history, ever since it began to take off as a movement, has been the search for an alternative non-social democratic **tradition**. E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) has evidently

been one major point of departure, but this book itself was appropriated by a powerful political or sub-political current which has meant that subsequent work has by and large reproduced its biases. Subjects have been chosen for the *dis-similarity* which they offered to the present—heroic periods of struggle, for instance, conceived not so much as forerunners of the present, but rather as examples of what have been lost (p. 3).

Again, there is a quarter-truth embedded in these statements. No-one will deny the enormous influence of Edward Thompson's writings, but whether it has led to an over-emphasis upon the alternative non-reformist tradition is open to question and there is no reference to the critical commentary of *The Making of the English Working Class* which has been slowly building up. And as for the concentration upon the heroic self-sacrifice of the past, it must be understood that any labour movement always incorporates within its own traditions a sense of the past, both the high points and the defeats. So that while no-one today who is a committed socialist can fail to be conscious of the great struggles of the nineteen-thirties—the Hunger Marches, the anti-Mosley demonstrations, the solidarity with Republican Spain—there is also an acute awareness of the 1931 betrayal, and of the miserable performance of the 1929–31 Labour government in general. The more specific analysis of the past, its deeper meaning within the framework of popular history, is surely why historians of the left engage in the study of the labour movement in earlier decades.

The *History* Workshop editorial seems, however, to deny this approach. There is, the editorial notes, a 'lack of curiosity of the Labour left about history and even fear of it—fear during the post-war boom that historical research might prove the Right correct' (p. 3); and these words suggest a lack of knowledge about what has been written or published. Recent studies of the miners in the twentieth century, for example—*The Fed* (1980) by Hywel Francis and David Smith; the excellent essays edited by Martin Bulwer, *Mining and Social Change* (1978) which relate to the North-East coalfield; the symposium on Wales: *A People and a Proletariat* (1980) edited by David Smith—together make an important **contribution** to our understanding of the labourist, labour-socialist, socialist and **trade-union** traditions of working-class communities. There is a great deal of relevant material in the journals of the regional labour history societies; and there are studies of working-class communities: *Jutepolis* by W.M. Walker (for example) which have been unduly neglected, at least south of the border. All this is not to suggest complacency. There are many areas of study that remain to be worked, and the nearer we get to our own time the more gaps there are. The impressionistic generalisations that Jeremy **Seabrook** is publishing (his latest, *Unemployment* (1982)) require, for example, to be tested against more detailed research and commentary on contemporary working-class life and community; and

Seabrook's argument, whatever its merits, that there has taken place a serious erosion of traditional working-class virtues must be incorporated within the debate about sectionalism that Hobsbawm initiated: a matter discussed below.

Alan Warde's *Consensus and Beyond: The Development of Labour Party Strategy Since the Second World War* does not, unfortunately, take us very far to meet the criticisms of the *History Workshop* editorial. The book is an unhappy mixture of rather skimmed fact and sociological abstraction, written in an English style that is sometimes meaningless and too often is so anfractuious that meaning is lost, or distorted. Consider this sentence from the concluding chapter; it is not wholly without meaning; but let the reader try rephrasing it in terms that would allow its understanding to be clearly appreciated:

**That minority control over economic production and gross inequalities in distribution are both in contradiction with dominant legitimations in terms of civic or 'politico-judicial' equality, is widely recognised as a determinant of political management on capitalism (p. 195).**

Dr. Warde's central concern, as his title suggests, is with the different strategies evolved by the Labour Party in the thirty years or so after 1945. The first period which followed the years of the Attlee governments, 1945–51, was dominated by the Social Reformism of Gaitskell, Crosland and Jenkins, providing the basis for bi-partisanship and the politics of consensus. Then, with the growing dissatisfaction with Britain's economic performance in comparison with other advanced countries, by the early 1960s there developed a 'significant change' in Labour strategy. The Wilson governments after 1964 'operated with a very different conception of the political process and of Labour's part in it' (p. 7). This the author describes as Technocratic-Collectivism, 'very much a philosophy of expert *dirigisme*' (p. 102). By the early 1970s, however, Technocratic-Collectivism had 'failed to resolve intra-party conflict or to avert social conflict' (p. 117), and the third strategy that now emerged was the Social Contract: 'A substitute for consensus, this was a political formula which sought peace on the strength of collaboration outside parliamentary channels with the principal functional interests in society—business and unions' (p. 7). For a while successful, the social contract floundered by the late 1970s as a result of developing economic and financial problems and the emergence of an 'oppositional strategy' by the left of the Labour Party. Since economic growth could no longer be guaranteed, the structures of the welfare state were being eroded. Public expenditure began to be cut from 1975, and unemployment levels rose. The social contract finally broke down in the winter of 1978–9, and the Conservative Party won

the general election of 1979.

This basic summary of Dr. Warde's argument makes the book sound more reasonable than it is. The problem with it is that there really is nothing more than elementary platitudes, and certain quite crucial parts of the analysis are either too simplistic or wrong. The economic context within which the Labour Party worked out its tactics and strategy is not analysed in any detail; the crucial differences between being in office, or not, in terms of policies, are not considered; and much too sharp a division is made between the 1970s and 1950s, while fully accepting the emergence of a continuing crisis from the mid-sixties on. A much more sophisticated analysis is provided by Keith Middlemas (*Politics in Industrial Society. The Experience of the British System since 1911* (1979)) whose starting point was the recognition of the flexibility and stability of the British political system from the middle of the 1920s, within a world system in which crises have been growing inexorably. Middlemas, to sum up a complex analysis, laid great emphasis upon what he called the 'corporate bias' of British society. The industrial and political crises of the pre-1914 years 'culminated in the manpower and production crises of the First World War, [and] British governments stimulated institutional growth among bodies representing business and labour interests, in order to maintain public consent' (p. 371). It is Middlemas' contention that these interest groups—employers and their organisations, trade unions and their members—became 'governing institutions, existing thereafter as estates of the realm, committed to cooperation with the state, even if they retained the customary habit of opposition to specific party governments' (p. 372). 'Governing institution' was further defined:

**as a description of a body which assumes functions devolved on it by government, shares some or all of the assumptions about national interests held by government, and accepts aims similar to those laid down by government; with the fundamental qualification that this form of association is not compulsory, but voluntary to the extent that it takes place within general limits derived, negatively, from the evidence of what the institution's constituent members will or will not accept (p. 373).**

'Corporate bias' is a useful analytical tool, and Middlemas is careful to distinguish it from corporatism. 'Corporate bias which, like the bias of a wood at bowls, is in itself no more than a tendency always to run to one side' (p. 380) rather than a more precise, more clearly defined and coherent pattern of behaviour on the part of either business or trade unions; but while it certainly does not explain everything, it is undoubtedly helpful in proceeding towards an understanding of political and industrial trends in the twentieth century. In this context Middlemas argues that corporate bias worked to a climax of relative success between 1945 and 1965. What Middlemas does not explain—and he would require

another volume for the purpose—is how it came about that the leadership of the dominant unions within the TUC accepted the practice of 'corporate bias'—an analysis that cannot be conducted only in terms of ideology, but within the whole complex of limitations imposed on trade unions in bourgeois society. But for Marxist historians there is one further major qualification, that alters fundamentally its meaning, to be made to the thesis in general. As expounded by Middlemas, a rough parity is assumed between 'governing institutions', and there is no sustained theory of the state. The argument that labour is, at the very least, an equal partner in the triangle of government, business and labour underlies the theory of 'corporate bias'; and it has never been true. In 1982, after three years of the most reactionary government in Western Europe, it is palpably not true. And Middlemas, by pushing too hard at his theory, was led into some incautious generalisations about the future. He had emphasised, very properly, the enveloping crisis of British society from the middle sixties, but he could still write, in the year that the Thatcher government came to power:

**it is difficult, on the evidence of the British case, to avoid the conclusion that trade unions' potential power will eventually predominate over that of management (p. 462)**

a statement which it is improbable to expect to come to pass. But he was wholly wrong in his final paragraph, and his error must be largely a failure to appreciate fully the extent and depth of the crisis afflicting the British economy. Given the serious problems that had beset governments in the most recent decade, he wrote—almost his last words:

**Faced with a choice of abandoning at least one of the three desiderata of post-war equilibrium, full employment, rising living standards and stable prices, governments since 1969 have chosen the first (p. 463).**

The Thatcher government has in fact abandoned all three, although by continuing a savage deflationary policy they hope to restore some stability to prices. The reason why Middlemas was wrong in his general forecast can only be his failure to plumb the full depth of the crisis of British capitalism, and the desperate remedies which have to be attempted. Moreover, the Thatcher experience has also re-asserted the close interwoven relationships between the Conservative party and multinational business, and the direct ways in which state power can and will be used to curb and constrain the political and industrial weight of trade unionism in crisis **situations**. What the Thatcher government has also demonstrated much more clearly than for many years is the diminution in the effectiveness of trade-union pressures without vigorous support from its political

wing in the Labour Party. The incompetence and ineffectiveness of the Labour Party in opposition since May 1979 may not have had the same quantitative or qualitative consequences as the massive rise in the unemployment figures, but it has been a factor of great significance. **Thatcherism** has not been supportive to the theory and practice of countervailing power.

The volume by Middlemas remains an important study not to be neglected, but to take analysis further we require both sophisticated methodological studies and hard accounts of how government structures, political parties, business and unions interacted in given situations and historical periods. *History Workshop* 13 has published one such analysis of quite extraordinary interest. Brett, Gilliatt and Pope in 'Planned Trade, Labour Party Policy and US Intervention: The Successes and Failures of Post-War Reconstruction' (pp. 130-42) provide the detailed story of the economic policies of the Attlee government 1945-51. The authors have used government records, especially cabinet papers, to great effect, and their conclusions are much sharper and more clearly defined than in any previous account. Moreover, the analysis offers a perspective for the whole period since the war. What was decided in those crucial years immediately following the end of the war against fascism has determined the main lines of economic development of the British economy in the succeeding thirty years, and has imposed strict constraints and limitations upon the Labour governments in this period.

The main conclusion of this study is that the crucial choice for the Attlee government in the years immediately following the war was either to take the 'apparently soft option' presented by American assistance, or to cut back drastically on overseas defence commitments and maintain strict controls on trade, currency levels and capital outflows. In more detailed terms the arguments may be summarised thus:

1. The conditions of the American loan negotiated by Keynes at the end of 1945 were to exert decisive influences upon future economic policy. In the short run, full currency convertibility was insisted upon within one year of the final ratification of the loan agreement. Although the UK was allowed to retain existing external controls, together with wartime domestic controls, the USA was now able continuously to exert conservative pressures upon policies in general. Thus, the UK was not permitted to switch overseas sources of supply away from the USA and the 'dollar gap' therefore became an inescapable fact of Britain's external position. When convertibility was introduced on 15 July 1947, a massive crisis erupted, and in the aftermath of this catastrophe, a major revision followed, of a marked conservative kind, of both home and foreign policies. The only thing that partially saved the position—at least temporarily for the next two years—was the

continued existence of international and domestic controls which made it possible to maintain full employment and expand output. Gaitskell, in a later memorandum of 1950, made the point emphatically that without the retention of physical controls it would not be possible to stem the outflow ~~from~~ the reserves or to preserve full employment as a long-term aim.

2. What Gaitskell argued against, but only in words, was what he described as 'the so-called "liberalisation of European trade"'. But the terms of the American loan had ensured a commitment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which involved the UK in liberalising trade with Europe in particular: through the OEEC. And this liberalisation did, of course, come about.
3. The post-war arrangements, accepted by the Attlee government, involved the UK with an increasing integration into the **American**-dominated alliance. The authors quote an illuminating passage from a memorandum of the British government's Economic Development Committee of May 1949. It was decided that 'further investment for health and education might endanger our efforts to achieve viability', not because social investment was reckoned to be less efficient than private investment, but from fears that 'increased investment in the social services might influence Congress in their appropriations from Marshall Aid' (p. 138).
4. The long-term consequences of the American alliance are the history of the past thirty years. The acceptance of very heavy, unproductive defence costs—between 1950 and 1966 the UK spent 4 to 5 per cent of GNP on defence—while in Germany and Japan there were virtually no defence costs, and their rate of investment in productive capital was consequently much higher. By the 1960s their productive investment, capacity and output had far outstripped the levels in the UK. Further, the liberalisation of trade, which came about after 1950, added to the heavy costs of unproductive investment, made the UK vulnerable to balance of payments deficits and capital outflows. **Stop-go** was the result: the short summary of the unfortunate economic history of the past quarter century, whose critical proportions have steadily grown.

These matters relate to the post-war history of the labour movement and underline the absence of a coherent statement of foreign policy on the part of the left in Britain. Its absence has been a remarkable phenomenon. The ad **hoc** campaigns against nuclear arms collapsed by the middle sixties and did not re-emerge until fifteen years later; the movement against the war in Vietnam; the political resentment against South Africa; these were **never** brought together into a single policy. Even more important, the fudging of the issue of NATO—central to the elaboration of any socialist analysis of foreign affairs—meant that there

never has been a coherent alternative. And without agreement on a foreign policy, the domestic aims of the left were inevitably limited and severely circumscribed. What has not been sufficiently analysed is the complex inter-relationships between the economics of Britain's international position in the world, her close alliance with America as a centre component of the latter's position on the bastion of **world** counter-revolution, and the radical alternative on the domestic front in Britain itself.

The most interesting debate of the immediate past has been that begun by Eric Hobsbawm in his **1978 Marx** Memorial lecture. The original lecture, which gave rise to a considerable discussion in *Marxism Today*, has now been reprinted with further contributions: *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (1981). Hobsbawm began by noting the changing social structure of the past half-century: by **1976** about **45** per cent of the occupied population could be classified as non-manual (p. 3); the introduction of women, especially married women, into the labour force has notably altered its overall composition; the decline in the traditional occupations of the first half of the century and the improvement in living standards have all contributed substantially to changes in working-class life-styles, and that these changes have markedly quickened during the last thirty years. He went on to note that 35 per cent of the labour force were not in any trade union, and that this proportion has remained unchanged since **1950**. His main emphasis was upon the evidence of electoral change; political support for the Labour Party as expressed in general election voting patterns had declined from **49** per cent of the total votes cast in **1951** to under **40** per cent in **1974**, and even lower in **1979**, when probably about one-third of trade unionists voted for the Conservative Party. Among the trends which provided the background to these changes were the growth of racism and, even more serious, because it represented a further general decline in class solidarity, the spread of economic sectionalism: 'a growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interest irrespective of the rest' (p. 14).

What was interesting about the discussion which followed the publication of Hobsbawm's lecture was the narrowness of the arguments to which contributors confined themselves. There was a correct line, it was suggested, which if pursued vigorously would effect the necessary transformation of social consciousness: the correct line being the marriage of political aims and objectives with industrial struggles; and then the forward march would be resumed. There were, it should be noted, some important differences of approach within the group of industrial militants who responded. Two leading members of the Communist Party, for example, Ken Gill and Pete Carter, strongly disagreed on this matter of sectionalism. The former argued that; 'The development of a militant wage *movement* is our first priority. That is the lesson of **1970-74**' (p. 22); while Carter put a totally opposed view:



Too often we substitute, as Gill has done, a certain kind of wishful thinking which says that because we see struggle as political the masses do also. In addition it should be remembered that the wages struggle is only one part of the class struggle and that at certain times some types of wages struggle may be politically self-defeating.

This is why one despairs when Gill says that the restoration of the wages movement is the key area of struggle, without any concrete suggestions as to **how** it is related to either the political struggle of the left or other areas of struggle like what is the relationship between the fight for wages and the struggle over investment policy, the problems of workers' control, or whether products are socially useful or not (p. 26).

Raymond Williams, whose contribution was the most far-reaching in its long-term implications, commented on the issue of sectionalism and its relationship to the wider aims of the movement:

Some years ago I described one of the same phenomena as 'militant particularism'; an awkward phrase, but I wanted to get past my simple equation of militancy with **socialism**. Of course almost all labour struggles begin as particularist. People recognise some condition and problem they have in common, and make the effort to work together to change or solve it. But then this is nothing special in the working class. You have only to look at the militancy of stockbrokers or of country landowners or public-school headmasters. The unique and extraordinary character of working-class self-organisation has been that it has tried to connect particular struggles to a general struggle in one quite special way. It has set out, as a movement, to make real what is at first sight the extraordinary claim that defence and advancement of certain particular **interests**, properly brought together, are in fact in the general interest. That, after all, is the moment of transition to an idea of socialism. And this moment comes not once and for all but many times; is lost and is found again; has to be affirmed and developed, continually, if it is to stay real (pp. 144-5).

The remainder of his contribution was a consideration of the problems of reconciling the particular interests of groups with the general interest of working people as a whole: the theory and practice of socialism. And almost alone among those whose commentaries were published in this volume he noted not only the 'many special and local features' of the British crisis, but that the UK was integrally involved in an international military and political alliance dominated by the United States. The point must be emphasised: that a strategy for the next twenty years that does not have at its centre a socialist foreign policy will be less than coherent, and will fail because its perspectives are parochial rather than international.

At one level, there is an interesting paradox to be confronted. We have witnessed, over the past two decades, a quite remarkable increase in the publication of material about socialism, in the history of labour movements everywhere, in the wide-ranging critique of the non-capitalist societies of Eastern Europe, and in the general sophistication of socialist

theory. The bookshelves are filled with exegeses of Marx; educational bodies discuss Marx and Marxism in ways, and to an extent, unknown in the 1950s. There is today a minority socialist culture different from anything we have previously experienced. It is a very small minority; it is affected by affluence; and in this general context there are three aspects of the history of the last decade that are worth remarking on. The first is the decline in numbers and influence of the groups to the left of the Labour Party, especially notable among the former Trotskyist organisations; the second is the emergence of a vigorous popular radicalism within the left of the Labour Party, in part and only in part related to the growth of the Militant tendency, but much broader in its social basis and its influence; the third is the growth of economic sectionalism and the decline in the general appeal of socialist ideas to the majority of the working population outside the committed within the trade unions and the Labour Party. What has to be faced now, Raymond Williams concluded, 'honestly and without recrimination, is that the struggle for that moment—the moment of transition to the *idea* of socialism quite as much as of a transition to socialist practice—has been at least temporarily lost' (p. 145). How and why this has come about must be the central matter for our concern in the coming years.