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## Review

# Engaging enemies: Hayek and the left

Simon Griffiths

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What has been the significance of Hayek's thought in shaping the ideological and political landscape of the late twentieth century? An important and intriguing part of the answer, as Simon Griffiths's *Engaging Enemies* insightfully shows, is that Hayek inadvertently did much to reinvent the British Left. The book's main contribution, as far as Hayek is concerned, is to move away from his much studied role in the ascendancy of neo-liberalism and the New Right, and to focus instead on the part he unwittingly played in the formation of the Left's ideological response to this challenge. This book, however, is not so much about Hayek as it is about the British left's engagement with aspects of his thought. Hayekian ideas, so the argument goes, were claimed by various thinkers in their efforts to break with the statist and paternalist forms of socialism that had dominated left politics for much of the twentieth century. Although David Miller, Raymond Plant, Hilary Wainwright and Andrew Gamble drew on different traditions within the left, they all used Hayek's ideas, in one way or another, to 'reassert a form of social liberalism' (p. 133). In so doing, Griffiths argues, they helped shift British political debate onto liberal grounds, thus also shaping the ideological space, as it were, for the 'modernisation' of the Labour Party into New Labour. This, in a nutshell, is Griffiths's main argument about 'the engagement with Hayek' and its role in the ideological history of the twentieth century. The book is divided into six chapters, with introductory and concluding chapters bracketing four substantive ones, each of which examines and contextualises one of the above-mentioned thinkers.

The first chapter sets the scene by offering an overview of Hayek's trajectory and a brief discussion of early post-war responses to his work by the British left. My only minor quibble with this concerns the claim that, for much of the post-war period, responses by the British left to Hayek's work were mainly overtly hostile and outright dismissive. The chapter struggles (somewhat unnecessarily, in my view) to sustain this claim for the purpose of giving a sense of coherence and distinctiveness to the chosen group of thinkers. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that, with the exception of Finer's (1945) *Road to Reaction*, there were in

fact very few noteworthy responses to Hayek that could be so characterised. Also, in my view, Wootton's (1945) *Freedom under Planning* clearly qualifies as an 'engagement' with Hayek (as defined in this book) – an engagement which might have deserved more attention here. For if, as is suggested in this book, the significance of the later engagement with Hayek is that it re-established liberty as the central concern of the left, then Wootton could be seen as an important intellectual precursor to this enterprise.

In the second chapter, Griffiths examines the brief revival of market socialism from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, focusing mainly on the work of David Miller. This chapter ably navigates the ideological context in which the left's turn to the market emerged and offers a brief account of Miller's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to provide a popular alternative to the then still dominant statist forms of socialism. Hayek's thought recedes somewhat into the background here, and I wonder whether Miller's engagement with it might have been unpacked a bit further. In particular, I am thinking here of Miller's (1989) discussion of the concept of liberty in the first chapter of *Market, State and Community*. This discussion, insofar as it challenges Hayek's distinction between positive and negative liberty, might have been usefully connected to the relevant treatments of the concept of freedom in Chapters 3 and 5. This, in any case, might have bolstered the theoretical contribution of a chapter whose primary purpose is historical – a purpose which it certainly fulfils.

The figure of Hayek re-emerges in Chapter 3, where the focus turns to the political thought of Raymond Plant, which, like Miller's, was shaped as much by the failings of the Labour Party as by the successes of the New Right. Plant, who was a social-democratic revisionist, engaged with various aspects of Hayek's work, including his conception of justice and his definition of liberty. The latter, in particular, served as a source of inspiration for Plant's conception of equality as 'a method for securing greater freedom' (p. 61). This attempt to combine 'the egalitarianism of social democracy with the liberal basis of new liberalism' (p. 62) constitutes Plant's primary contribution to the wider 'liberalization of socialist thought' (p. 67), Griffiths argues. Another, quite different, engagement with Hayek can be found in the work of the journalist, academic and political activist Hilary Wainwright, who is the subject of Chapter 4. Griffiths illustrates how Wainwright built on Hayek's epistemological argument against socialist planning in order to develop a radical (and most un-Hayekian), social movement-based pluralism. This, I feel, would have been a good place to discuss the question of democracy and, indeed, the liberal-authoritarian dimension of Hayek's thought, which surely represents an area of significant dissent between him and his left interlocutors.

Finally, in Chapter 5, Andrew Gamble's engagement with Hayek is analysed and contextualised. Griffiths convincingly shows how Gamble sought to reabsorb Hayekian ideas about the market, private ownership and entrepreneurship into a more egalitarian liberal outlook. Here, as elsewhere, the discussion is admirably



attentive to relevant developments in British politics in general and within the Labour Party in particular. However, I am not entirely convinced of the strength and the value of the link made between Gamble's Hayekian-inspired arguments and the new liberalism of the early twentieth century, resting, as it here mainly does, on a shared commitment to the general idea of positive liberty. Ideational similarities, as Bevir (2000, p. 283) has noted, can be found in any two sets of political ideas when defined abstractly enough. My point here is not that the identification of such broad similarities lacks explanatory power (it does, and the book doesn't claim otherwise); rather, I merely wish to point out that this link becomes more tenuous upon closer inspection of new liberal arguments and ideas. Gamble's embrace of private ownership, for example, sits quite uneasily with the arguments for public ownership advanced by the two most eminent new liberal theorists, L.T. Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson (Jackson, 2012). This does not, of course, undermine the observation of broad ideological similarities between the early and the late twentieth century; but it does show that this observation comes at the cost of glossing over the complexity of British political thought (which the book otherwise strives to recognise).

The concluding chapter offers some wider reflections on the ideological and political landscape in late twentieth-century Britain as well as an interesting, but all too brief, reflection on the role of enmity in the process of ideological change. As regards the latter, I largely agree with the contention, first, that ideologies are formed through adversity, and, second, that the importance of this has been somewhat neglected in studies of political thought (p. 135). But I would like to add two further considerations to Griffiths's exploration of the issue. First, and substantively, I would emphasise that Hayek not only helped sustain the relations of enmity of the twentieth century, but that he took them to a whole new level when his ideological zeal eventually led him to argue that socialism was a threat to the survival of populations (a Social Darwinist trope which David Miller described, perhaps too charitably, as 'extravagant and unsustainable'). Second, and conceptually, I would suggest that the distinction between two modes of enmity, which is implicitly reflected in the contrast between 'engagement' (agonism) and 'polemics' (antagonism), could be tackled more explicitly and systematically, perhaps through the figure of Carl Schmitt, whose relevance to the subject is briefly mentioned here. The question, then, is how ideological change is shaped by the interplay between, on the one hand, engagement and ideological 'hybridisation' (p. 142) and, on the other, polemics and ideological solidification.

This book makes an original and valuable contribution to our understanding of the complex ideological history of the twentieth century. It is well written and manages to combine clear exegesis of the relevant ideas with pointed discussions of the context in which they emerged. On the whole, and despite some reservations, I have no doubt that it will prove insightful and useful to those interested in the study of political ideologies and in the history of British political thought, as well as to students of Hayek's work.



## References

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Jörg Spieker  
King's College London, London WC2R 2LS, UK