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Review Article

New Labour's post-Thatcherite modernisation project: a Third Way?

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Tony Blair *The Third Way: new politics for the new century*, pamphlet no. 588, Fabian Society, London, 1998, 20 pp., £3.50.
Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour: politics after Thatcherism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, xii +210 pp. £45.00, £12.99 (pbk).
Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: the renewal of social democracy,* Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, x + 166 pp., £25.00, £7.99 (pbk).
Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour: labouring under false pretences?*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999, xiii + 242 pp. £45.00, £14.99.
Martin Powell (ed.), *New Labour, New Welfare State? The 'third way' in British social policy,* The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 1999, ix +351 pp., £45.00, £18.99.

Having just returned from a month in the USA, teaching summer school to graduate students on social and family policy in education, I eagerly read and/or reread these publications to get a renewed sense of politics and policy in Britain today. Whilst I was in the USA I became steeped in discussions of 'post' perspectives – post-colonial, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-feminist – on 'discourses of welfare' or the welfare state which now may include education and even communitarianism. I found myself longing for a more pragmatic as well as programmatic, or what might be called 'critical realist', perspective. So I was not disappointed by having to engage with these four books and the pamphlet, although initially they seemed a long way from my current research interests on 'family and education' from a feminist perspective.

I have had a very enjoyable, exciting and even exhilarating time reading them. Together they present a most appealing package of accounts of New Labour as we are about to enter the new millennium. One gets the feeling of tremendous political activity and policy action over the last few years with plans and proposals galore for the future. To paraphrase the words of Celine Dionne for the heroine of *Titanic* 'It will go on…'

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Tony Blair's pamphlet is extremely clear and a lucid presentation of both the origins of New Labour and how its 'progressive' project may now be defined as the 'Third Way', setting out plans for the future, across the various and traditional areas of social policy, largely relying on policy documents, green and white papers and the like for the detail. Inevitably of course this pamphlet is not analytical but entirely descriptive and prescriptive, setting an agenda and describing this as the 'Third Way' to distinguish it from previous Labour and Conservative approaches.

At a more analytical level, however, it is rather more difficult to get either a consistent or comprehensive sense of what New Labour's project is actually about. It is even difficult to find agreement amongst the various authors on whether it is new, a third way, *post*-any*ism* – Thatcherism, modernism, structuralism, colonialism, feminism or whatever. In part this is because very different perspectives and approaches are adopted by the authors, although they all range across the social sciences – from sociology to political sciences to economic and social policy analysts. In part it is also because their historical and analytical approaches are also different. Yet they all try to describe, explain and account for the rise and success of New Labour as a *new* project and/or phenomenon. And, for the most part, all the authors are sympathetic to a left or leftish i.e. left-of-centre position. They do not adopt the critical stance that they, each in their different ways, may have previously adopted towards the New Right, neo-conservativatism, neo-liberalism or Thatcherism.

Two of the books make no mention of the 'third way' as a term or concept, although they both try to look at the ways in which New Labour is new, and trying to steer a 'middle way' or path between left and right. Colin Hay's book is one of the most recently published but has been a long time in the writing. Thus it concerns itself more with the similarities and differences between Thatcherism and the impact of Thatcherite approaches on New Labour. The specific contribution that Hay makes to the debate is to locate the policy developments in a political economy perspective, reviewing both the political and economic background and theories which may be seen to have had an influence. He also peppers his narrative with summary charts and tables, which help with the complexities of the arguments and comparisons, both historical and across parties. He comes nearest to developing an analysis of the role played by socio economic change in people's lives and thereby their interests including the impact on voting patterns. The one weakness of his account is that he did not develop a full analysis of the transformations of the social class system. His approach of using Anthony Downs' economic theory of democracy to show both how New Labour used it as an elec-

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toral strategy and as a way of being a 'catch-all party' is both illuminating and innovative. His use of puns is perhaps what makes him in the end the most sceptical of critics, concluding that New Labour have invented a whole host of new approaches to modernisation and the economy but they may ultimately be 'labouring under false pretences' (p. 208).

Stephen Driver and Luke Martell also do not make use of the concept of the 'third way' but again as political analysts compare and contrast New Labour with Old Labour and Thatcherism. It is worth quoting their simple and neat approach: 'The central argument of the book is that New Labour represents an exercise in *post-Thatcherite* (*sic*) politics ... Blair himself has used 'post-Thatcherism' to describe New Labour – "post", of course, simply means after. So anything Blair cares to put on Labour's agenda will be by definition post-Thatcher: she has gone to another place. But the idea... means more than this' (pp. 1-2). The whole book is written in this refreshingly readable style. They review first the origins of New Labour and then consider how policies have developed in respect of economics, welfare and social policy and the constitution. Despite the easy style they do not avoid detail or complex arguments and spend two chapters considering in what ways New Labour is new and different from Thatcherism especially in respect of 'communitarianism' and whether or not it goes 'beyond left and right'.

Martin Powell's edited collection is remarkable if only for the reason that it has been published exceptionally quickly, given that it makes reference to policy proposals and developments in 1999 and it was published by the summer of 1999, a testimony to new technologies at the very least, which sadly and curiously are rarely analysed in these texts. Although the book's sub-title is *The 'third way' in British social policy*, much of the debate is not about how to understand this concept but rather in conversation/dialogue with Driver and Martell and their concepts. Powell's introduction and conclusion are excellent summaries of the debates and arguments and cover complex and detailed material about policy developments with remarkable fluency. Each chapter also is written to a clear brief and provides an overview of a particular policy or issue. Some memorable chapters are those on health care (Paton), employment (Cressey), social security (Hewitt) and citizenship (Dean). Weaker contributions are those on education, since this does not cover an analysis of higher education, surely one of the most 'innovative' especially for students in and of higher education?; and on community care, since here the family is treated in traditional 'residual terms' rather than as if it were more 'universal' – in ways in which New Labour has been trying to deal with family policies.

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Interestingly Giddens does try to include in his analysis 'the democratic family', *inter alia,* in *The Third Way*. In quintessential Giddens' style we are offered an array of questions and dilemmas to which solutions are addressed. However, for students of social policy this book may be seen as superficial and glib, glossing over detail and historically inaccurate with respect to the Beveridgean origins of the welfare state. Yet it also offers a synthesis of a sociological analysis with a new approach to global policy debates. In this respect Giddens has subtly shifted to a far more prescriptive than analytical approach, mirroring the arguments of Blair's Fabian pamphlet.

All the books manage to present a clear picture of the elements of New Labour's project or policies even if there is no overarching or overall agreement: it is new, post-Thatcherism, about modernisation but not post-modernism, although in going 'beyond left and right' or steering a 'third way' it represents policies after those of modernism. In some senses it is easier to explain what it is not about, as regards the arguments of these books. The one set of issues that is notably absent from any of the books or analyses is that to do with changing family and social structures or class systems, and the roles of women in both private and public life now. I assume from the lack of reference that this is not an issue that overly concerns New Labour, or its political and social analysts here reviewed. The only exception curiously is the fleeting glimpses one gets from Tony Blair's spirited pamphlet with the emphasis on 'balancing work and home' especially through a national child care strategy and other work and welfare reforms.

This lacuna contrasts remarkably with the public and policy debates in the USA at present. 'Family values' from diverse perspectives, including both left and right, as well as feminist, were constantly on the agenda throughout the summer. Hilary Clinton's campaign to run for office as a senator for New York, when her husband's second term as president ends, replacing one of the more social policy-oriented senators, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (renowned for developing the Family Assistance Plan for President Nixon in the early 1970s), was widely debated. The interview given to the new *Talk* magazine (August 1999) was heralded as a 'feminist' defence of her husband's sexual peccadilloes, given that the origins lay in his family background of sexual and psychological abuse. More importantly 'the problematic F-word' (Anna Coote, *The Guardian,* 22 May 1999) is not off the public agenda in the USA and women's voices are not absent or silenced from the policy debates. Thus one striking difference between Clintonism and Blairism, as regards the renewal of social democracy and the 'third way', is the part played by women for women and families.

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