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Social Democracy and Social Science

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II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of New Labour: A Critique (Routledge, 2005), and The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and co-author, with R.A.W. Rhodes, of Governance Stories (Routledge, 2006), and Interpreting British Governance (Routledge, 2003).

Social Democracy and Social Science

To begin, I would like to thank Tim Bale, Jeremy Gilbert, and Stephen Meredith for their engagement with my work. It is always a pleasure to respond to such thoughtful criticisms. I am also delighted to be reminded of the number and variety of scholars for whom the issues I address are compelling. Those issues can be stated briefly. I wanted to offer a critical interpretation of New Labour and the traditions of social science on which it draws. And I wanted to point to desirable and plausible alternatives – an interpretive social science and a pluralist and dialogic politics.

New Labour

What is New Labour? I argue that New Labour is a social democratic response to issues highlighted by the New Right, where the issues are conceived in ways indebted to communitarianism and new institutionalism. Bale, Gilbert, and Meredith do not so much reject this view as suggest that it is remarkably close to New Labour's self-understanding, perhaps precisely because it emphasises the place of social science in New Labour rather than addressing questions about power. I want to reply by asking more generally about the place ascribed by interpretive social science to actors' self-understandings and to power.

(i) How does my view of New Labour relate to that of its architects?

Meredith suggests that my position overlaps with that of the architects of New Labour, who represent their project as an up-dated social democracy in a modern setting.

I agree. I would even say that if we grant that the architects of New Labour sincerely view their project in this way, any adequate account must overlap with that view.

The kind of interpretive social science I favour explores social life in terms of its surface meanings rather than by appeals to deep structures. In this view, to explain New Labour we have to point to the changing meanings or beliefs of its architects. However, while an adequate interpretation of New Labour has to invoke the meanings or beliefs of its elite, it does not have to accept their assessment of the truth of those beliefs. I accept neither their view of the modernity to which they are responding nor the validity of their response. To the contrary, I trace their beliefs historically to particular traditions (eg. new institutionalism and communitarianism) to exhibit their contingency and partiality. And I offer historical and philosophical critiques of these traditions to show that the elite of New Labour is wrong in its view of the modernity to which it is responding, and so in its chosen response. Alas, Gilbert and Bale object respectively to my emphasising the particular traditions I do and to my critique of these traditions. Let me turn, then, to their objections.

(ii) What role does social science play in New Labour's ideas and policies?

Gilbert regards my focus on social science as narrow. I do not have the space here to provide evidence of the role of social science within New Labour's ideas and policies. However, I can discuss the general claim that a focus on social science is narrow.

The recent upsurge of interest in the history of the human sciences owes much to the insight – associated above all with Michel Foucault – that no matter how we assess

the truth of scientific knowledge, it is the source of practices and techniques that come to govern and discipline large parts of our lives. This insight suggests that a focus on social science need not be a narrow concern with stuff that goes on in universities. Such a focus can be an attempt to unravel the genealogy of the practices, policies, and techniques by which we are governed. So, for example, I go on from a study of the history of the new institutionalism to discuss how it made possible New Labour's promotion of networks, partnerships, and joined-up governance in the public sector.

(iii) How should we conceive of power?

Gilbert's objection is perhaps to the very idea of governance as being constituted by practices and techniques derived from contingent forms of knowledge. Consider his complaint that I do not answer the question: why did the New Labour elite respond to the dilemmas of social democracy by drawing on new institutionalism rather than by turning to a pluralist and participatory politics? In my terms, I explicitly address this question by, yet again, pointing to a contingent, historical relationship between traditions. I argue that New Labour turned to new institutionalism because it fitted so well with the liberal and Fabian conceptions of social democracy to which they adhered. Yet Gilbert implies that any answer couched in terms of traditions is inappropriate since it does not locate New Labour "in a wider context of power struggles".

So, the question is: does my interpretation of New Labour allow suitably for power? The answer depends on how one thinks about power. Consider, first, a concept of power that refers to the way traditions impact on our beliefs thereby helping to define us, our actions, and so our world. My interpretation of New Labour is all about power so

conceived: an elite indebted to liberal and Fabian traditions of socialism drew on ideas and techniques from the social sciences to make sense of their world and to promote a new type of governance. Consider, second, a concept of power that refers to social relations based on interests that people have outside of the particular traditions by which they make sense of the world. My interpretation of New Labour does indeed avoid appealing to power so conceived. It does so because I think this second concept of power is invalid; people always construct their understanding of their interests against the background of a tradition.¹

It seems to me that Gilbert's question expresses a tendency in much post-Marxism. On the one hand, post-Marxism avows a postfoundational analysis of the necessarily constructed nature of our beliefs including our beliefs about our interests. Hence it increasingly adopts cultural modes of analysis and the first concept of power. On the other, it still gestures toward the second concept of power, typically by way of a nostalgic invocation of "capitalism". It hints at social relations within which people have interests that are at least partly apart from all traditions. It does so by appealing to such interests – or the structures from which they are implicitly derived – to explain the dominance of a particular discourse. The discourse is explained by its congruence with the interests of a group that oppresses others.

Gilbert certainly seems to want me to explain why New Labour drew on new institutionalism by referring not to contingent traditions, but to the restructuring of capitalism.² I do not do so because I believe that the kind of postfoundationalism that motivates the first concept of power requires us to forego nostalgic gestures toward the second one. If all beliefs are laden with prior theories, we can not explain the dominance

of a discourse or tradition in a way that gestures toward interests that people, classes, or organisations are supposed to have outside of particular discourses. We are left instead with historical genealogies of the ideas, techniques, and traditions through which people construct and respond to issues. We are left with a historical study of the traditions of social democracy and social science through which the elite of New Labour have responded to the restructuring of capitalism.

(iv) What place does theory occupy in social science?

Whereas Gilbert argues that I overstate the importance of traditions of social science, Bale suggests I am too harsh in my criticism of mainstream social science. In brief, I argue that mainstream social science explicitly or implicitly objectifies interests, norms, or other social facts thereby eliding the contingency and contestability of social life.

Bale suggests I go awry in attributing such theoretical commitments to social scientists. He argues that social scientists are inspired by “mundane instrumentality”. On one level I accept his view. No doubt social scientists often use one approach here and another there in the belief that they are the best tools for particular tasks. But, on another level, we should not allow their lack of awareness of the theoretical commitments lurking in the approaches they adopt to obscure the fact that these commitments do indeed lurk there. They (and perhaps Bale himself) seem to assume that we can make theory-neutral judgements about which tool is best for any given task. However, this assumption itself presupposes a naïve empiricist theory, according to which tasks and tools are simply given to people rather than being already constructed in part by their prior theories.

Such empiricism might add to its repertoire of approaches the interpretive one I favour; but it could not offer philosophical or historical analyses of various approaches to social science, for if it did, it would expose their theoretical incompatibility and their contingency and contestability. So, Bale is able to laud ethnography and history as ways of getting at New Labour – even to suggest my endeavours are a suggestive beginning to a fuller process of “soaking and poking”; but he is manifestly troubled by attempts to relate the texts and actions of New Labour and social scientists to traditions characterised by specific theoretical commitments.³

It is true that I want to expose theoretical assumptions in various types of social science. It is also true that when we expose such assumptions, we associate social scientists with various theories that often take us away from their empirical accounts of government. But what is wrong with such theoretical analyses? The only alternative would seem to be an acceptance of the possibility of a theory-free social science that uses a range of theoretically neutral techniques to explore a given empirical domain.

What I am after, in contrast, is empirical studies informed by an interpretive approach. New Labour: A Critique tries to provide such a study of New Labour in government. It is not a complete study of all facets of New Labour. Hence I entirely agree with Bale and also Gilbert when they call for similar studies of other aspects of New Labour. We could do with interpretive studies of New Labour in relation to party members, think-tanks, policy communities, and international agencies.⁴

The Alternatives

Because New Labour draws on new institutionalism and communitarianism, my wish to foster an interpretive social science is also a wish to foster alternatives to New Labour. In brief, I argue: whereas New Labour accepts the expertise and control that modernist and positivist social science purports to offer, alternative traditions of social democracy and alternative approaches to social science point toward more participatory, pluralist, and dialogic concepts of policy and democracy. Bale, Gilbert, and Meredith raise several questions about this alternative.

(i) How different is my alternative?

Bale treats alternatives to New Labour as he does critiques of mainstream social science. Just as he is able to laud ethnography and history, so he notes (with approval) my studies of New Labour's policies on the economy and welfare – policies indebted to new institutionalism and communitarianism. And just as he is troubled by attempts to relate texts and actions to traditions characterised by specific theoretical commitments, so he does not appear to recognise that in relating these policies to problematic strands of social science, I offer a critique of them. He appears to parse my alternative as a vision of community without policy implications. Yet I would suggest, to the contrary, that few specific policies can be mentioned precisely because the alternative is to leave policy not to government relying on experts but to citizens engaging in dialogic policy making and participatory democracy at a plurality of sites.

(ii) Is an alternative possible?

Meredith seems to share my scepticism toward mainstream social science and its impact on New Labour. Yet he implies that I am too sanguine in my assessment of the prospects for an alternative. He argues that the Labour Party is necessarily or inevitably wedded to pernicious forms of social science: the Party cannot escape the strait-jacket of the positivism that is the essential core of its ideological tradition. On one level I share Meredith's pessimism. Modernist and positivist strands of social science are dominant. Governments look to such social science for technocratic solutions. The state promotes such social science through the policies that govern academic research. And there is little sign any of that will change.⁵ But, on another level, I would suggest that when Meredith writes of such trends as if they were "necessary", "inevitable", and "essential", he adopts the language of the very type of social science we are trying to challenge. These terms imply that social scientists can identify an essential core to the Labour Party, necessary limits to what it might become or do, or the inevitable path of its development. They imply that social scientists can offer expert advice based on their knowledge of social institutions and processes. In contrast, I would argue that the Labour Party, its actions, and its future are open-ended products of contingent, situated agency. In my view, social scientists can offer only informed conjectures as to what people might chose to do in the future. They cannot declare some options "necessary" or "inevitable" and others impossible.

(iii) What roles do social movements and the Party have in promoting an alternative?

As Gilbert observes, my alternatives of an interpretive social science and a pluralist and dialogic politics overlap with strands of post-structuralism and cultural

studies. One achievement of cultural studies, and perhaps post-structuralism too, has been to undermine any notion that politics and the state can be entirely insulated from civil society, social movements, and popular culture. Here Gilbert raises the issue of the role of social movements as sites for promoting social democratic alternatives to New Labour.

Let me clarify my view on the role of social movements. Social movements are useful but insufficient for realising a democratic alternative. They are insufficient because as long as we have a democratic polity the alternative will need to be supported by a political party or group in some kind of assembly; at some point a social movement must work through a political party or turn itself into a political party. In my view, then, people who participate in social movements are withdrawing from politics – or rather democratic politics – only in so far as they do so without acknowledging the need to engage a political party at some point.⁶

Given that Gilbert and I broadly agree on the role of social movements, perhaps I might conclude by saying why I thought it important to insist on the role of a political party and so on working within Labour. If the besetting sin of some post-Marxists is a gesture back to given interests, that of some post-structuralists is a concept of critique as an end in itself absent any indication of the direction in which we ought to move. My argument for proceeding within Labour extends my challenge to this concept of critique to three other ways of side-stepping the question, what is to be done? It challenges the retreat to a meta-ethics that emphasises undecidability and the impossibility of adequately justifying any political choice. It challenges the retreat to an ethic of self-fashioning in opposition to dominant norms without attempting to address the question of what content

– let alone public policies – one hopes to promote through such self-fashioning. And it challenges the tendency to support a range of opposition social movements without ever addressing the question of how one would decide what to do when the aims of these movements conflict with one another. In short, my emphasis on working within Labour is intended to return us to questions about the democratic practices by which we want to reach collective decisions. It is a call for the left to rediscover democratic utopianism.

Bibliography

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¹ I deploy a postfoundational concept of tradition to do much the same work as those of discourse or language while allowing more explicitly for situated agency.

² Gilbert encourages us to find such an answer in Finlayson’s work (which I regret was published too late for me to refer to in my book). Although Finlayson offers a fine cultural analysis of New Labour, it is notable that ultimately he wants to explain the content he ascribes to it not by a historical narrative that reveals its contingency but by suggesting it is – in a sense which, given his emphasis on culture remains vague, even little more than a residual gesture toward an elder Marxism – a “reflection” of “contemporary capitalism”.

³ Allow me to comment here on the studies to which Bale directs us (studies I ignored because they are about the Labour Party not the New Labour governments). First, Pat

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Seyd and Paul Whiteley's work is, as Bale notes, located in a rational choice model and reliant on survey research. While I think models and surveys have a role to play, I am less sanguine than Bale about the theoretical compatibility of Seyd and Whiteley's work with an interpretive approach. Second, Lewis Minkin's work is a fine example of soaking and poking, but it does not offer genealogies of the ideas, techniques, and practices it reveals; in that respect, it is the kind of ethnographic and historical work that one might expect modernist empiricists to extol.

⁴ Professor Rhodes and I have explored some of the policy communities responsible for the implementation of government policy (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006).

⁵ Compare Donovan (2005: 597-615).

⁶ I hope that by explaining that I am arguing only that social movements are insufficient (not useless), I make it clear that I do not regard all participation in them as a withdrawal from politics, so I do not take "politics" to refer exclusively to party politics as distinct from social movements and cultural practices.