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Journal

British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 2

Author

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Publication Date

2000

Peer reviewed

NEW LABOUR: A STUDY IN IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

A common view of ideologies reifies them to postulate an unchanging core of moral principles or debates that frame changing attitudes to particular policies. Thus scholars have sought to map New Labour onto ideological traditions by comparing it with their core features. In contrast, this paper argues that ideologies are in a constant process of change, with every one of their elements being open to such change, and with change in one element having spill-over effects on others. New Labour should not be compared with reified ideologies but rather traced historically as a refashioning of socialism to meet problems such as inflation, the underclass, and the changing nature of the working class, where the consequent changes in policy have entailed further changes in ethical principles.

NEW LABOUR: A STUDY IN IDEOLOGY¹

“The ethical basis of socialism is the only one that has stood the test of time,” argued Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1995 (Blair, 1995, 12). The emergence of New Labour has been characterised by two rhetorical moves found in this utterance. First socialism is equated primarily with moral values, not policies or socio-economic arrangements. Next the relevant values are held up as the enduring core of socialism so defined.

A survey of Labour Party Members of Parliament in 1906 found that the authors and books that had influenced them most were John Ruskin, The Bible, Dickens, Henry George, and Thomas Carlyle (Stead, 1906). By 1962 this had changed to George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, G. D. H. Cole, and Karl Marx, a list indicating a more economic and less religious inspiration (New Society, 13 December 1962). The direction of change continued through 1975, when Marx topped the list, followed by R. H. Tawney, Shaw, Nye Bevan, and Wells (New Society, 2 December 1975). A survey in 1994 indicated a return to religious and ethical influences: Robert Tressell’s, The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropist was mentioned by twenty per cent of respondents, after which there came Tawney, The Bible, Marx, and Steinbeck, with George Orwell making a first appearance. As the commentary on this survey noted, “some notion of a new ethical socialism is clearly the answer that an increasing number of Labour MPs have begun to turn to in response to the political malaise of the left in the late 20th century” (New Statesman and Society, 30 September 1994).

New Labour’s representatives often suggest it retains core socialist values whilst looking for new ways of realising them in changed circumstances. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Tony Wright, a Labour MP, write of

“fundamental socialist values” that have “an enduring quality” even as “particular policy applications . . . change, in the light of new problems, knowledge and circumstances” (Brown and Wright, 1995, 13 and 29). The Party is said to be “New in our means, but Labour in our aims”.

New Labour’s representatives here reify socialism. They turn a contingent and changing product of human activity into a fixed entity defined by an enduring core of fixed values. The Labour Party thereby gains rhetorical advantages: it can claim both to be true to its inheritance and to have ditched the policies that critics allege made it unelectable, even dangerous. Surprisingly a reified model of ideology also remains widespread among scholars, explicitly or implicitly inspiring most attempts to explain New Labour’s ideas. An appreciation of the limitations of this model can improve our account of New Labour as well as of ideologies more generally.

Theorising Ideologies

A reified model of ideology remains remarkably common. At its most unsophisticated, this model represents ideologies as rooted in ahistorical human needs. Proponents of ideologies are particularly inclined to give weight to their beliefs by claiming they reflect universal facts of human nature. Socialists from Max Beer to Tony Benn have argued that their ideas go back to a primitive communism tied to universal values originally embedded in religion (Beer, 1953; Benn, 1991). At a more sophisticated level, this model allows for ideologies arising in particular contexts that explain the salience of the problems they address and the values they defend. Once ideologies thus arise, however, they contain fixed accounts of human nature and fixed ethical commitments against the background of which particular policies are formulated, tried out, and rejected. Even though scholars sometimes allow for ethical

debate within an ideology and overlaps between ideologies, they still, in Andrew Haywood's words, "seek to identify a common core of values and principles which are distinctive to the ideology" (Heywood, 1992, 11).

Numerous studies of ideologies treat them as reified objects based on static values, concerns, or debates. Andrew Vincent, for example, discusses the historical origins of socialism only then to define it in terms of stable, abstract views and debates on "human nature", "equality and liberty", "state and democracy", and "markets and the economy" (Vincent, 1992). Perhaps such descriptions provide useful ways of introducing people to themes that recur in complex political traditions. However, problems arise if we ascribe explanatory power to such reifications.

One such problem appears in Vincent's account of New Labour. Vincent identifies some of the contrasts between New Labour and an earlier state socialism: New Labour exhibits a greater acceptance of markets, a more jaundiced view of the state, and a stronger moral tone. Thereafter he compares New Labour's ideas with various strands of new liberalism before concluding that "what is called New Labour is a redrafting of components of the new liberalism which has, in fact, recovered some of the pre-1914 'new liberal' language" (Vincent, 1998, 57). New Labour has reinterpreted "a fecund liberal vocabulary" (Vincent, 1998, 57). Surely however new liberalism can explain New Labour's ideas only if representatives of the latter were influenced by the former?

The use of new liberalism to explain New Labour's ideas also appears to preclude our evoking other traditions such as the socialist one. When Vincent does consider the socialist tradition, he effectively assimilates it to new liberalism. He does so, moreover, not by a historical investigation of influences but again by pointing to similarities. He says, "purportedly socialist theorists, such as Harold Laski, G. D.

Cole and R. H. Tawney, employed theoretical frameworks which were remarkably close to those of the new liberals” (Vincent, 1998, 55). Surely however we could establish that new liberalism by itself can explain New Labour only by showing other ideologies had not influenced the representatives of the latter?²

Vincent’s reified model of ideology informs his account of New Labour. Because he reifies ideologies, he seeks to establish which ideology an instance belongs to by comparing it with the values and debates allegedly constitutive of different ideologies. New Labour exhibits the characteristics of new liberalism, so we should explain it by reference to the latter. Moreover, because he reifies ideologies, he tends to see them as mutually exclusive. New Labour exhibits the characteristics of liberalism, so we can not see it as an example or development of socialism.

A non-reified, decentered model of ideology refuses to ascribe to it an existence independent of the particular beliefs and actions of individuals (Bevir, 1999). Ideologies are not fixed entities we can take as given. They are ideas and practices that people produce through their activities. They are contingent and changing traditions in which no value or debate has a fixed, central, or defining place. We can describe an ideology adequately only by tracing how it develops over time as its exponents inherit beliefs and actions, modify them, and pass them on to others. Because ideologies are not fixed entities of which specific instances partake, we can not locate people in one by comparing their ideas and actions with its allegedly constitutive features. Rather, we must trace the relevant historical connections to identify the ideology against the background of which people or organisations adopted the ideas and practices they did. To explain New Labour’s ideas, we must explore a process of development instead of comparing the result of this process with reified ideologies. After all, the fact that the process ended in views similar to new liberalism

does not mean new liberalism played a role in the process, and if it did not do so, it must be irrelevant to an explanation of New Labour's ideas.

Michael Freeden provides perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to avoid the first problem we have found to beset a reified model of ideology (Freeden, 1996).

Freeden argues that ideologies are "morphological", a biological metaphor that seems to disavow the static analyses associated with structural and reified models.

Ideologies consist, he tells us, of central and peripheral concepts that exist in complex, dynamic relations with one another. To elucidate an ideology, we have to explore the diverse ways in which the relevant concepts are combined at different times.

Freeden's theory has much in it we might admire - the refusal to segregate ideology from political thought, the recognition of the dynamic relationship between concepts, and the account of "decontestation" as a feature of dominant ideologies. Depolying this subtle theory leads him to an account of New Labour as an "amalgam" of "liberal, conservative, and (how could it be otherwise!) socialist components" (Freeden, 1999, 45). His recognition of the dynamic relationships between concepts, for example, informs an admirable refusal to box New Labour "in a hermetically sealed ideological family" (Freeden, 1999, 44). By evoking ideas from different ideologies, Freeden manages to cover most of the important ideas that characterise New Labour.

Freeden's morphology does not seek to slot particular instances into one exclusive ideology. Nonetheless, although we get a fuller account of New Labour's ideas, his model of ideologies still exhibits problems. For a start, because he defines ideologies by sets of concepts, he concentrates on matching different bits of New Labour's programme with the core bits of various ideologies and traditions. While the flexibility of his model allows for a subtle and complex description of New Labour, the theoretical problem of explanation remains unresolved. Surely, after all, we can

not just assume that New Labour took the bits of its amalgam from the traditions he highlights?

In addition, we might raise here a second problem with reified models of ideology. Even if we assumed New Labour took its ideas from the ideologies Freedon identifies, we would not know why it had adopted this amalgam, rather than another. Because Freedon sees an ideology as a set of concepts that can be combined in diverse ways, he focuses on elucidating the ways they have been combined. Because the concepts themselves are static, albeit contested, they seem to determine, or at least limit, the possible combinations.³ Surely however people can reject concepts, modify old ones, and create new ones in unlimited ways?

A decentered model of ideology suggests people inherit ideologies but then they can extend or modify them in unlimited ways.⁴ Ideologies are not constructs combining static, albeit contested, concepts or debates. They are contingent, changing traditions that people produce through their utterances and actions. They are inherited beliefs and practices that people apply and modify in new ways for their own reasons. Thus, we can elucidate an ideology adequately only by tracing the processes in which its exponents apply, extend, and modify it. Because ideologies are not composed of concepts with a given range of meanings, we can not explain their development by showing how people or organisations combined such concepts. We must trace the historical processes of reflection and contestation in which people or organisations deployed them in response to various difficulties. To explain New Labour's ideas, we have to explore a process of development instead of describing how the result of this process combines reified concepts or ideologies. The fact that the process led to New Labour adopting ideas often held by liberals and conservatives does not tell us why it did so. To explain New Labour's ideas, we have not only to locate it in the tradition

from which its representatives set out but also to grasp how they then modified this tradition in response to specific problems.

A third problem with a reified model of ideology appears if we return to the self-understanding characteristic of New Labour. This model suggests ideologies consist of a protected set of concepts or values that remain static, albeit subject to debate, while the policies associated with them develop in response to changing circumstances. However, if we thus define some values or concepts as protected, we will be insensitive to ways they might be extended, modified, or even rejected. Alternatively if we recognise that these values or concepts have changed, we will be tempted to talk of a rejection, even betrayal, of the ideology. David Marquand, for example, tells us that New Labour “is not socialist . . . it has abandoned the tradition once exemplified by such paladins of social democracy as Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, Ernest Bevin and Hugh Gaitskell” (Marquand, 1998; also see Russell, 1996). If ideologies are defined by core concepts, either the concepts must remain unchanged or the ideology must have been deserted. The ideology can not develop in ways that transform the core concepts.

A decentered model of ideology conceives of them as webs of interconnected beliefs or concepts mapping onto a perceived reality at various points. At times changes in ideologies will begin with concepts a long way from points in the web that map onto external reality, and at times they will begin with concepts close to such points. Either way, no concept can stand on its own, so the content of any concept depends on those around it, so the initial change will cause further changes throughout the ideology. Like a stone dropped in a pond, the initial change will send out ripples disrupting other parts of the ideology. No part of the web remains immune from revision. On the contrary, changes in the policies people think appropriate to the

world will effect their values. Even if the impetuous for the ideological changes in the Labour Party derives from grappling with altered circumstances, we still should expect effects of this process to appear in the Party's ethic.

Martin Seliger provides perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to avoid this third problem with a reified model of ideology (Seliger, 1976). Although he distinguishes between the fundamental and operative levels of ideology - where the fundamental level is that of ethical principle, and the operative level that where principles are compromised by the demands of action - he allows for the fundamental level being modified as a result of operational factors (Seliger, 1976, 192-3). By allowing for alterations in the fundamental level, Seliger opens up the possibility of describing changes in the allegedly core values of an ideology. Nonetheless, although he provides a more complex account of ideological change, his model remains unsatisfactory. Once we recognise ethical principles and policy commitments change alongside one another, we have no reason to take the former as fundamental in any significant sense. Principles and policy commitments must appear instead as mutually dependent in a way that precludes our conceiving the former as basic or fundamental and the latter as derivative or operational. At best, Seliger's concepts are misleading metaphors: they suggest a hierarchical, dependent relationship where there is a reciprocal one. At worst, they are indicative of a mistaken belief in the protected nature of ethical values within reified ideologies.

We have found aspects of reification in the theories of Vincent, Freedon, and Seliger despite the fact that they all appear to oppose essentialist accounts of ideology. To oppose essentialism is, of course, not necessarily to avoid it. Nonetheless, it is worth pausing to ask why their theories exhibit aspects of reification despite their hostility to essentialism. One possible explanation would be that we simply have to

abstract from particular thinkers if we are ever to identify patterns and so ideologies. Vincent, Freedman, and Seliger might thus suggest that their theories do not postulate reified ideologies, but merely ones that exhibit necessary features of generalisation and abstraction. They might portray their abstractions as contingent and historicist rather than essentialist ones based on a list of core values. We should not dismiss this argument too quickly: it is, after all, this very contrast that explains why their theories represent comparatively sophisticated attempts to avoid reification. What we should do though is ask whether they undertake the necessary tasks of generalisation and abstraction in the most appropriate manner.

Vincent, Freedman, and Seliger abstract in order to set up general models of ideologies. Typically they decide upon the synchronic and diachronic content of an ideology by relying on standard categories, such as liberal and socialist, together with their sense of the dominant strands in each category. Aspects of reification appear here because they have no adequate criteria by which to define what does and what does not belong within each ideology. Rather, having constructed abstract models, they typically proceed to describe or classify particular cases by their similarity to the models. Aspects of reification appear again here because they thus give priority to the abstract models in locating particular cases within their categories. The models effectively act as prior, given objects in terms of which to understand particular cases.

While a decentered model of ideology does not preclude classification in terms of ideational similarities, it should make us wonder whether such classifications serve any useful purpose, particularly as we can find some similarities, defined sufficiently abstractly, between any two sets of political ideas? (Bevir, 1994). The value of classifications usually resides in their explanatory power. Yet with ideologies, the similarities, and so classifications, have no explanatory power. Just because certain

instances of political thought share some characteristics does not imply that they have a historical relationship such that one can explain the rise of the other, or that these characteristics explain why they manifested themselves at the particular moments they did.

A decentered model of ideology thus prompts us to conceive of the necessary tasks of generalisation and abstraction in a different way. As we have emphasised, we should not concentrate on classifying particular cases in relation to abstract models but on tracing historical connections; we should explain particular cases by exploring the processes by which people or organisations inherited and modified certain ideas and practices. Thus, we should abstract in order to postulate an ideology as that which captures the inheritance of the particular case in which we are interested. We should trace historical connections back through the immediate influences on the case we are explaining to the beliefs and practices that constitute the inheritance of the influences. By doing so, we would not define ideologies in terms of a given content – whether perennial or contingent and historicist – but rather pragmatically in relation to that which they explain. Moreover, we would give priority to the particular case as the basis of our identifying the synchronic and diachronic content of the ideology.

We should appeal to an abstraction derived from the historical influences on the case we are studying, not one established prior to that case. And we should justify doing so because these influences help explain the historical character of that case, not because the case happens to bear similarities to the abstraction.

Difficulties for Socialists

A reified model of ideology fails to recognise the process of change as continuous. It encourages us to compare New Labour's ideas with accounts of the

allegedly constitutive features of abstract constructions. In contrast, a decentered model draws our attention to the ways people inherit beliefs and practices, modify them, and pass them on to others. Properly to explain New Labour's ideas, we must provide an account of such a historical process. Although a complete account of this kind would be a considerable undertaking - one requiring us to unpack various strands within New Labour - we can highlight three aspects of this process that correspond to the three problems highlighted in reified models of ideology. First, when considering Vincent's work, we found we should begin by locating New Labour in the ideological tradition from which its representatives set out. Second, when considering Freedden's work, we found we should proceed by showing how New Labour had modified this ideology in response to specific issues. Third, when considering Seliger's work, we found we should show how New Labour's responses to these dilemmas has led to changes in the socialist ethic.

The study of ideologies requires us to trace processes of change, not identify similarities. To begin, we should locate New Labour in the ideological tradition from which its adherents set out. Competing positions co-exist within New Labour, and they derive in part from different traditions, some of which overlap with traditions that also inform other political parties. Nonetheless, we can collapse most of the positions into a broad socialist tradition that embraces most of the different heritages within the Labour Party without making too miss-leading a simplification. As we saw, Brown and Blair still identify themselves with the ethic of this tradition. Peter Mandelson, once Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and Roger Liddle, one of Blair's policy advisers, similarly tell us that New Labour stands for "an ethical socialism which draws on the ideas of Tawney and Ruskin" (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 4).

Although the early ethical socialists were influenced by predecessors including the Owenites, romantics such as Ruskin, and Christians such as F. D. Maurice, the themes of this tradition came together in the 1890s. The most important themes were: an idealist philosophy, immanentist theology, or evolutionary theory that established the social nature of our being; an analysis of brotherhood or fellowship as the moral expression of our social nature; a faith that human instincts were leading us towards an ethic of fellowship; a call for this new ethic to take hold of our personal lives in a process of individual regeneration; a belief that individual regeneration would lead inexorably to social transformation; and a social ideal entailing a moral economy and co-operative community (Jones, 1968; Pierson, 1973; Pierson, 1979; and generally Dennis and Halsey, 1988). In the first half of the twentieth century, socialists such as R. H. Tawney, John Macmurray, and William Temple continued to express many of these themes. In the 1950s and 1960s, ethical socialists, like many others, became more and more committed to Keynesian economic planning and a welfare state as practical means of realising their moral ideal.

The values of social justice, citizenship, and community were central to British socialism during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Although there were debates about the exact content of the values, we can identify widely shared beliefs about them. Social justice rested on a notion of moral equality requiring substantial movement towards economic equality. The distribution of wealth should be based on principles of need and welfare, not the dictates of market efficiency. The market was seen as immoral since it placed material prosperity over the moral equality of human beings. A moral economy was one based on every person being given his or her due. When socialists accepted Fabian or Keynesian economic theories, they could combine their notion of a moral economy with notions of efficiency, but even then they thought the state should

act to promote social justice if necessary at the expense of efficiency. As Tawney explained, “the essence of all morality is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another” (Wright, 1987, 19).

Citizenship was an inclusive concept entailing social and economic rights as well as political ones. In the welfare state, these rights became embodied in universal entitlements to things such as education, housing, and unemployment protection. As citizens we participate in a common life, and the state, as the moral expression of this life, has a duty to provide us with a minimal standard of living. Temple famously argued, “every citizen should be secure in possession of such income as will enable him to maintain a home and bring up children” (Temple, 1976, 97). Although some political theorists wrote of an “invertebrate residuum,” the members of which lacked the capacity to be full citizens, socialists rarely paid much attention to such a residuum (Bosanquet, 1895, 112). When they did, moreover, they suggested that the residuum would be brought to full citizenship by the welfare state, or that we owed a duty to provide even for the residuum. When socialists argued that wealth should depend on service and so be denied those who did not fulfil their social obligations, their target was almost always the idle rich who were seen as merely exploiting the workers, not the unemployed.

Community was conceived in terms of co-operation and social, or at times class, solidarity. Socialism was defined principally against competitive individualism, not capitalism. The moral economy and the rights of citizenship were expressions of a co-operative community. Many ethical socialists had a mystical vision of fellowship as an expression of a divine unity found in all things: Edward Carpenter wrote of a “region of Self” in relation to which “the mere diversities of temperament which

ordinarily distinguish and divide people dropped away and became indifferent, and a field was opened in which all were truly equal” (Carpenter, 1985, 410). The unity of all might be expressed in these mystical terms, or alternatively as a corollary of our brotherhood under God, or using an idealist philosophy. For socialists, this unity required a fellowship in which people would co-operate for a common good rather than competing for their own private advantage.

British socialism became associated with ideals of social justice, citizenship, and community as well as Keynesianism and a universal welfare state. New Labour represents a descendent and modification of this tradition. No doubt a full account of British socialism would qualify the broad picture just given by looking beyond public pronouncements and iconic texts to Cabinet discussions and social policy. Perhaps doing so would establish that Labour governments regularly appeared ambivalent about universal welfare, full employment, and higher taxation, in part because of economic and electoral concerns. Nonetheless, we are identifying a tradition against the background of which Blair and others set out: we are not comparing New Labour with our understanding of the Party’s past (contrast Bale, 1999). Thus, Blair, Brown, and Mandelson’s explicit appeals to the ethical moment in British socialism as that which has most influenced them provides us with a justification for focusing on these values.

Within British socialism, we can highlight a distinct modernising or reformist strand, often associated with pragmatic restrictions on more enthusiastic ethical ideals. New Labour’s campaign to reform the Party’s constitution - especially Clause Four - drew attention to parallels between it and previous modernisers such as Tony Crosland and Gaitskell. Some commentators describe New Labour as the legacy of the earlier revisionists (Kenny and Smith, 1997; Leonard, 1999; and – for before Blair – Shaw,

1993; Smith, 1992). We too are locating New Labour against the background of a socialist tradition within which the revisionists have a prominent place. However, we should remember that we have to trace a process of change within British socialism, not just find influences, let alone similarities, between, say, Blair and Gaitskell. To explain New Labour, we have not only to locate its adherents against the background of the socialist tradition but also to grasp how they have modified this tradition in response to specific problems. During the 1980s certain issues dominated British politics. These issues - including inflation, the existence of an underclass, and the changing structure of the working-class - posed difficulties for socialists.⁵ Although other issues played a part in the emergence of New Labour, we will simplify the analysis by focusing on these three.

Inflation, the underclass, and arguable the changing structure of the working-class became salient issues in British politics in large part because of their place in the narratives of Thatcherism (Bevir and Rhodes, 1998). Because the New Right highlighted and responded to the relevant issues before the Labour Party did, some commentators regard New Labour as a continuation of Thatcherism (Hay, 1994; Hay, 1997; Hay, 1999).⁶ Once again, however, we should remember that we have to trace a process of change within British socialism, not just find similarities between, say, Blair and Thatcher. Surely, moreover, we would expect New Labour to have responded to the salient issues rather differently from the New Right since it did so against a socialist background. New Labour's adherents have responded to the issues by turning to ideas found in various places - communitarianism, stakeholder economics, and the third way.⁷ Because we can explain why these ideas and policies appealed to New Labour only by understanding the relevant issues and their impact on

socialism, we need to focus on these things as much as the successive phrases the Party has used to evoke its vision.

By accepting the reality of the problems, socialists broke with many of the policies associated with the Keynesian welfare state. They implied that such policies no longer provided a practical means of realising their moral ideal. In addition, this reformulation of socialist policies has entailed a modification of socialist values. To simplify, we might say that the response to inflation has altered the socialist idea of social justice, the response to the underclass entails a new notion of citizenship, and accommodating the changing structure of the working-class has required a different idea of community.

Inflation and Social Justice

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Labour Party took an extension of state control to be the primary means of promoting social justice. At the very least, the state was to create greater equality through progressive taxation and the provision of welfare benefits. By 1980, however, these policies were threatened by a growing concern with inflation, bureaucratic inefficiency, and government overload. Inflation in particular was seen as a major problem for the British economy by the end of the 1970s when the Labour Government, under pressure from the I.M.F., agreed to strict monetary controls (Harmon, 1997). For many, especially of the New Right, inflation was conceived in the terms of the monetarist critique of Keynesianism (Gamble, 1988, chap. 2). Monetarism encouraged a shift from demand management to supply-side reforms, where the keys to efficiency were seen as privatisation, marketisation - including a more effective labour market - and related measures such as the use of corporate management techniques in the public sector. The advocacy of such supply-

side reforms was combined with an emphasis on the values of choice and freedom. The state was portrayed as being aloof and unresponsive to individual wants in a way the market was not.

During the 1980s and 1990s, socialists increasingly came to accept four central tenets of New Right economic theory: first, the key monetary lever should be interest rates, not fiscal policy; second, the supply side of the economy should be considered more significant than demand management; third, low inflation should be as important a goal of economic policy as low unemployment; and finally, governments should develop monetary policy in accord with rules, not discretion, to maintain credibility. Labour Party documents now suggested that economic recovery would bring an unacceptable inflation unless it was pursued in the context of a "commitment to macroeconomic stability" and "supply-side policies to boost investment in industry" (Labour Party, 1991; Labour Party, 1994). Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, has expressed New Labour's reluctance either to raise taxes or to boost demand by increasing public expenditure. The Labour government demonstrated the strength of its commitment to low inflation most dramatically by giving control over interest rates to the Bank of England.

An emphasis on the supply-side of the economy has led the Labour Party to modify its stance towards things such as privatisation and marketisation. Mandelson and Liddle tell us that New Labour has renounced the statist policies once associated with the Party in favour of a concern with efficiency and good management (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 27 and 151). In doing so, they tie efficiency and good management to marketisation rather than the traditional bureaucratic model of public service provision. Thus, although the Labour Party remains critical of a blanket assumption of the superiority of the private sector and markets, it has accepted large

parts of the supply-side revolution. David Clark, then the Minister for Public Services, explained that policies such as market testing “will not be pursued blindly as an article of faith” but they “will continue where they offer best value for money” (Clark, 1997). Moreover, although the Party in opposition had proposed a moratorium on contracting out, this has now been rejected in favour of a shift of emphasis from compulsion to a dependence on greater efficiency. New Labour has also accepted the New Right’s decentralisation of the public sector, including the use of agencies to perform a variety of tasks. The extent of the change in Labour policy is highlighted by the fact that privatisation now has a place in government thinking, as both Blair and Brown indicated during the 1997 election campaign.

New Labour’s turn to supply-side concerns with efficiency and marketisation has entailed a modification in the socialist concept of social justice. Two changes stand out as particularly significant. The first is a shift in the balance between equality and efficiency. Whereas socialists used to stress the importance of a moral economy even if it sacrificed efficiency, they now argue that redistributive measures should occur only when they do not damage industrial competitiveness. The important contrast here is not between what socialists actually achieve, or what sorts of policies they adopt when faced with hard choices, but rather between ideological commitments. Traditionally socialists defended social justice as the first call on the economy. Gore, for example, argued that the Biblical doctrine of stewardship meant individuals possessed wealth only as a trust for the social good with the first charge on industry being a living wage for the workers (Gore, 1892, 10-12). New Labour, in contrast, emphasises the need to secure an efficient and competitive economy as the context within which moves towards social justice can be made. Blair even told a meeting of European socialists that minimum standards of social provision were vital

only if they did not hinder job creation (Blair, 1997). This greater concern with efficiency clearly has implications for the socialist view of distributive justice. If things like high wages and less progressive taxation are necessary for efficiency, they are acceptable. People can earn or merit greater wealth than others as a result of their role in the economy rather than their need or welfare. “New Labour’s belief in the dynamic market economy,” we are told, “involves recognition that substantial personal incentives and rewards are necessary in order to encourage risk-taking and entrepreneurialism” (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 22).

The second significant change in the socialist concept of social justice is a new emphasis on individual choice. Whereas socialists traditionally stressed the needs and welfare of producers and the political involvement of citizens, they now pay as much attention to the freedom and choices of consumers. Traditionally socialists saw social justice primarily in terms of a minimal level of welfare and a fair deal for the worker. New Labour still believes in a minimal level of welfare, but the concern with a fair deal for the worker is matched, and at times replaced, by one with empowering the consumer. Mandelson and Liddle, for example, tell us that public services should be provided in ways that suit the citizen rather than the provider (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 155). This shift to the consumer reflects a concern with the alienation of many citizens from government bureaucracy, and as such it need not have direct implications for the view socialists take of the relations between workers and private industry. Nonetheless, public sector workers are still workers, and, moreover, a more suspicious attitude to public sector unions, and the championing of consumers in the public sector, almost inevitably has spill-over effects in the view socialists take of the private sector. It is no coincidence, therefore, that New Labour has sought both to distance itself somewhat from trade unions and to emphasise the need for consumer

choice in the private sector. Still, the important point here is how the new emphasis on choice entails a shift in the socialist view of distributive justice. If individuals are to be free to choose things such as the school their children go to or who manages their state-pension, then we must accept any inequalities that result from their making good or bad choices. Distribution must reflect the merits of the choices people make as well as their needs or welfare.

Obviously we should not over-emphasise the changes in the socialist ethic. New Labour remains keen to reduce the inequalities between a privileged minority and the underprivileged. A greater stress on the choices of consumers, moreover, does not mean that New Labour no longer worries itself with the limitations of markets as a means of securing a just distribution. Nonetheless, the way in which socialists have responded to the dilemma of inflation, and also those of bureaucratic inefficiency and government overload, has resulted in a clear modification of their concept of social justice. As early as 1985, Bryan Gould, then a leading figure within the Labour Party, could say, "Mrs Thatcher has succeeded to a considerable extent in changing the terms and meaning of the debate so that the emphasis is more on freedom than equality" (Gould, 1985, 65). Now New Labour has placed equality in a more subsidiary relationship to efficiency, and modulated the principles of need and welfare with those of choice and desert.

The Underclass and Citizenship

The Labour Party traditionally stood for a concept of citizenship that entitled all citizens to certain political, social, and economic rights. The state, as a moral expression of community, was to provide a guaranteed minimal standard of living to its citizens. We have a duty to care and provide for the less fortunate members of

society, and the welfare state is one way of our fulfilling this duty. For many socialists, the provision of universal benefits was also a way of creating virtuous and independent citizens. During the 1980s, however, growing worries about an underclass suggested that these later socialists had been overly optimistic. Political theorists began to argue that the welfare state had created a class of people who were dependent on benefits and had neither the means nor the incentive to improve themselves. They suggested that the provision of benefits that did not carry obligations actually undermined the individual responsibility of the recipients. The underclass is made immoral by its situation in a way that promotes crime, drug-abuse, and other evils that corrode the moral fabric of society (Murray, 1990; Murray, 1994). Once again, the Conservative governments of the 1980s were the first to address the problem posed by belief in an underclass. They altered the range and conditions of many welfare benefits in ways that the Labour Party at first condemned outright.

Now though New Labour accepts much of the analysis of the underclass just described. It accepts, in Mandelson and Liddle's words, that "the complex web of means-tested benefits weakens incentives" so "today's welfare state too often traps people in long-term dependency" (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 72-3). New Labour seems to be as keen as the Conservatives to deal with this dilemma by modifying the range and conditions of welfare payments. Simply by accepting the existence of an underclass much of which is taken to be in a condition of welfare dependency, New Labour has committed itself to devising new policies designed less to alleviate poverty than to enable people to break free of the welfare-trap. Blair, for example, has made it quite clear that "Labour's modern welfare should not just recommend increased benefits but . . . [also] reduce dependency and get rid of disincentives to paid work" (Blair, 1994). Thus, the Labour government has put a welfare to work programme at

the centre of its agenda (Labour Party, 1996a). Indeed, the British government identified employability as a central theme for its Presidency of the European Union (D.E.E., 1998b).

The welfare to work programme sets up a New Deal between the government and job-seekers. The government will provide training, education, and also places on employment schemes, rather than cash payments. In return, the unemployed have to take up these opportunities or they will lose some of their benefits. The first part of the New Deal to be put into practice was that for young unemployed people. Young people who have been out of work for over six months now have four options: a job with a private or public sector employer, a job in the voluntary sector, a place on an environmental task force, or full-time education or training. All the options include a minimum of one's days training a week so as to provide the recipients with the skills needed to remain in employment. Yet the "New Deal is not a soft option," for the young people have "to take up those opportunities" - "staying on benefit will no longer be an option" (D.E.E., 1998a). The New Deal has since been extended to lone parents, disabled people, and any adult who has been unemployed for more than two years. The government hopes that a combination of carrots and sticks will provide the underclass with the chance and the incentive to break-free of welfare dependency. New Labour is responding to the apparent existence of an underclass by moving from a system of welfare benefits paid by the state to one in which the state provides people with the resources to enter the work-force. As Blair has explained, "the modern welfare state is not founded on a paternalistic government giving out more benefits but on an enabling government that through work and education helps people to help themselves" (Blair, 1996a, 209).

New Labour's response to the underclass has entailed a modification in the socialist concept of citizenship. Two changes again stand out as especially significant. The first is a shift from the citizen as a recipient of rights to a greater stress on the citizen as a bearer of duties. Whereas earlier socialists typically evoked the idea of duty primarily to denote the obligation of the well-to-do to improve the lot of the less privileged, many now talk at least as much of the duties welfare-recipients owe to society and of the need to instil virtues within welfare-recipients. The Commission on Social Justice, set up to advise the Labour Party on policy reforms, flagged this change in socialist thinking back in 1994. Its report defended rights to health, education, and housing, but explicitly tied these rights to duties. The state's role is to enable citizens to improve themselves and also to compel them to meet their responsibilities (Commission on Social Justice). More recently, Blair has explained that "we accept our duty as a society to give each person a stake in its future" but in return "each person accepts a responsibility to respond" and "to work to improve themselves" (Blair, 1996d). The appeal to duty carries beyond the sphere of employment: the right to housing carries an obligation to abstain from anti-social behaviour, and the right to education for one's children entails an obligation to ensure they attend school. For New Labour, "personal and social responsibility are not optional extras but core principles of a thriving society" (Blair, 1996d).

The second change in the socialist concept of citizenship is the aspect of exclusion that follows from this new stress on the obligations of the recipients of social rights. Those people who do not fulfil the duties ascribed to them by the state are no longer seen as full citizens. Their exclusion is implicit in the fact that they are to be denied some of the rights given to other citizens. Under the New Deal, for example, "young people who refuse or fail to take up a place in one of these options

will be required to take up a place identified for them by the Employment Service,” and, more significantly, if they then “refuse or fail to take up [these] places . . . benefit sanctions will be applied” (D.E.E., 1998a).⁸

Traditionally socialists have defended substantive social and economic entitlements to things such as welfare, housing, and education. They have seen these things as universal rights. New Labour, in contrast, emphasises universal rights to opportunities, not substantive benefits. David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, describes the welfare to work programmes as a way of “tackling social exclusion” by ensuring “opportunity for all” (D.E.E., 1998b). This, of course, is very different from the older socialist belief in tackling social exclusion by providing goods such as housing, education, and unemployment benefit to those in need. The shift takes us from universal rights to universal access to opportunities, where those who do not fulfil the attached duties are excluded from the associated rights. As Mandelson and Liddle explain, New Labour wants a welfare state that is “universal in its reach but no longer uniform in what it offers”; a welfare state providing “services that offer people a hand-up, not just cash payments to give them a hand-out”; a welfare state that “guarantee[s] access for all to a decent minimum quality of life and fair life chances, while permitting greater individual freedom of choice” (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 143). Whereas socialists traditionally tied citizenship to a right to a decent minimum quality of life, New Labour ties it only to access to such a life.

The Working-class and Community

Socialists have always made much of the value of community. William Morris, in his utopian vision, News from Nowhere, famously wrote that “fellowship is

heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death" (Morris, 1910-15, 230). As Morris's utopian vision illustrates, socialists traditionally unpacked fellowship in terms of an egalitarian and communal spirit in which each individual identified primarily with the commonweal, not their own material advantage. In practice, this spiritual fellowship came to mean above all else heavily progressive taxation, with people sacrificing a degree of personal prosperity to contribute to society. Community underlay the traditional socialist values of social justice and citizenship. The ideal of community inspired the tax system that financed the redistributive measures associated with the socialist notion of justice and the socio-economic rights associated with the socialist notion of citizenship.

During the 1980s, however, Eric Hobsbawm and other left-wing intellectuals referred more and more often to the changing structure of the working-class (Hobsbawm et. al, 1981). They argued that new technologies and greater affluence had combined to change the aspirations of the group of voters on whom Labour was most dependent. If workers had not fallen into the underclass, they had risen into the lower middle-class. Hobsbawm interpreted these changes within a Marxist-inspired historiography to argue that post-Fordism meant that the forward march of labour had been halted. The aspirations of the new workers were seen as being reflected in the popularity of various Conservative policies such as the selling of council houses.⁹ During the 1980s and 1990s, numerous electoral pundits and left-wing theorists came to believe that the Labour Party had to bring itself into line with new economic patterns and the social groups they had created.

Successive election campaigns and meetings with focus groups convinced New Labour that the Party's association with higher rates of taxation was a major millstone. Most people just were not willing to contribute more to the community.

New Labour has tried desperately hard to distance itself from the policy of increased taxes for the lower-middle and working classes. These classes are not expected to forgo further material comforts for the sake of community. Here, for example, are Mandelson and Liddle reiterating the message: New Labour does not believe in “big tax rises for the hardworking majority”; “a fairer tax system ought to be about rewarding hard work”; and “it would be illogical for Labour to oppose a relief in the tax burden on ordinary families” (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 105-8).

So strong was New Labour’s commitment to not raising taxes that even before the 1997 election the Party agreed to stick to the spending limits set by the previous Conservative government. Apart from a marked reluctance to raise taxes, New Labour has responded to the changing structure of the working-class largely through the same policies by which it has dealt with inflation and the underclass. These policies are intended not only to help to keep government spending down, but also to make government more responsive and to give people more choice. They are intended to meet people’s aspirations as identified by Frank Field, one time Minister of State for Social Security - the aspirations to enjoy the satisfactions of ownership and choice and to “spend for themselves the gains of increased earnings” (Field et. al., 1996, 26).

New Labour makes much of its faith in community. Doing so undoubtedly helps to reinforce a simplistic but effective contrast between it and a harsh, uncaring New Right. Thus, Blair insists that people are “citizens of a community,” not “separate economic actors competing in the marketplace of life” (Blair, 1996a, 299-300). Many of New Labour’s spokespeople really are inspired by an idea of community. Community sometimes seems to symbolise both a New Jerusalem and a moment of conversion in New Labour discourse just as it did for earlier ethical

socialists such as Philip Snowden with his come-to-Jesus rhetoric. Blair's "political awakening," for example, came through a discovery of "MacMurray's interpretation of the social commitment of Christianity through the idea of community" (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 33; also see Bryant, 1996, 293-5). Nonetheless, New Labour has made substantial changes to the socialist concept of community. In particular, the acceptance of the legitimacy of the new aspirations of the working-class has led to a greater role being given to competition and materialism - to what Wright calls "collective individualism" (Wright, 1997, 6).

Socialists traditionally defined community in terms of co-operation and against self-interest, competition, and the pursuit of one's own material advantage. New Labour, in contrast, eulogises a community that encompasses these latter things. Blair has said that the "final destination is a society where you combine that strong and competitive and enterprising sense of achievement with a sense of decency and compassion from public services for all people" (Independent on Sunday, 12 April 1997). Similarly, Field evokes a tradition of ethical socialism only then to call for policies that recognise that "self-interest is one of the most powerful of human characteristics" (Field, 1993, 20). Socialists used to see the welfare state as a practical expression of interdependence and fellowship. New Labour, in contrast, believes in restructuring the welfare state to embrace individualism and competition. Field has written of the importance of "channelling self-interest and self-improvement in a manner which enhances the common good" (Field, 1995, 3). The main ideas behind the Labour Party's proposed welfare reforms, given its reluctance to raise taxes, seem to be this appeal to self-interest together with the emphasis on duties we noted earlier (Field, 1997).

The socialist vision of community no longer consists of individuals who undertake co-operative activity for a common good that subsumes their particular selves. Rather, the community consists for New Labour of stakeholders who are united by having a stake in a shared enterprise, which requires them to fulfil certain duties, but who otherwise are encouraged to compete so as to advance themselves in their own ways and by their own merits. According to Blair, community requires us to acknowledge “an obligation collectively to ensure each citizen gets a stake in it,” but the purpose of this stake appears to be less to unite us around a common good than to create a society within which “opportunity is available to all, advancement is through merit, and from which no group or class is set apart or excluded” (Blair, 1996c). Blair’s vision of a stakeholder society is one of competitive individualism within a moral framework such that everyone has the chance truly to compete. Hefty doses of individualism, competition, and materialism have been fed into the traditional socialist ideal of community.

Conclusion

Accounts of New Labour’s ideas typically compare them with reified ideologies - new liberalism, revisionist socialism, the New Right. We should ask what we gain from such comparisons. If we are familiar with an ideology but not New Labour, they might help introduce us to New Labour’s ideas; after all, any comparison of an unfamiliar object with a familiar one can help to acquaint us with the former. Yet the comparisons purport not only to familiarise us with unfamiliar ideas, but also to provide a deeper understanding or explanation of New Labour’s ideas. They do not do this. To find similarities between two sets of ideas is not to establish they stand in an informative or explanatory relationship to one another.

To explain New Labour's ideology, we have to trace a historical process in which its adherents inherited a set of beliefs and then modified them in response to salient difficulties. Although New Labour contains competing ideas that we should draw using fine brushes to evoke different traditions and different responses to varied problems, we have sketched the broad outline of this picture by depicting a socialist tradition that faced difficulties highlighted by the New Right such as inflation, welfare dependency, and the changing structure of the working-class. The role of the socialist tradition and the New Right in this process explains the similarities of New Labour's ideas to those of Crosland and Thatcher. Yet we should remember that we need to trace a historical process of change, not looking for similarities. Hence, to assimilate New Labour's ideas too closely to earlier modernisers would be to neglect the impact of recent dilemmas, while to assimilate them too closely to the New Right would be to neglect the impact of the socialist tradition.

Much energy has been spent debating whether or not New Labour remains part of the socialist tradition. The debate provides a canvas on which to commend or oppose New Labour but is otherwise of little value. Contributors to the debate propound definitions of socialism, exhibiting varied degrees of historical sophistication, before then comparing New Labour with these definitions. But all their doing so tells us is whether or not their view of New Labour fits under their definition of socialism. Moreover, because ideologies are contingent and changing entities, their static definitions must be arbitrary. Their definitions can express only their values or their account of what happens to have characterised most socialists until now. Their definitions can not capture the essence of socialism or its legitimate historical trajectory, for there is no such thing.

Because ideologies are contingent and changing entities, New Labour necessarily exhibits both continuities with, and changes from, its predecessors. It has adopted new policies in response to problems such as inflation, welfare dependency, and the changing structure of the working class. The process of devising new policies has led socialists to modify their ethic. Of course, we can define ethical concepts at a level of abstraction such that they embrace the values found in both earlier socialists and New Labour - we can refer abstractly to social justice, citizenship, and community. But the fact would remain that in adopting new policies socialists have transformed the content of these ethical concepts. The notions of “choice and responsibility” espoused by New Labour are not implicit in the socialist tradition in the way Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, has suggested (Straw, 1993, 29). Rather, New Labour has brought a greater concern with choice to the socialist ideal of social justice, a greater concern with duty and responsibility to the socialist ideal of citizenship, and a greater concern with competition and materialism to the socialist ideal of community.¹⁰

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¹ I thank Mike Kenny for his helpful comments.

² Although Vincent does not show this, Blair occasionally evokes new liberals, though he refers far more often to ethical socialists (Blair, 1996a, 14-15).

³ Freeden here sees linguistic meanings as fixing or limiting hermeneutic ones, not as abstractions based on hermeneutic ones (contrast Bevir, 1999, chap. 2).

⁴ Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following suggests no set of concepts can fix or limit the ways they might be applied (Wittgenstein, 1972, §§. 143-242).

⁵ In highlighting such dilemmas, we echo studies of the constraints operating on the Labour Party and social democrats more generally (Boix, 1998; Esping-Anderson, 1995; Franklin, 1985; Gillespie and Paterson, 1993; Kitschelt, 1994; Scharpf, 1987). By using the term dilemma, we draw attention more clearly to the fact that these constraints are in part ideologically and socially constructed. We thereby encourage questions about whether New Labour could have responded differently to them. Left-wing critics often assimilate these recent constraints to contradictions they believe have long bedevilled the Party (Coates, 1996; Panitch and Leys, 1997). In doing so, however, they further limit our scope for explaining the particular changes associated with New Labour.

⁶ One way of assimilating New Labour to the New Right is to see both as marking a periodic break with a post-war social democratic consensus (Driver and Martell, 1998). In addition to the general problems with such assimilation, this one relies on a suspect minimisation of conflict in the post-war years (Pimlott, 1988, 129-41; Conekin, Mort, and Waters, 1999).

⁷ See respectively Blair, 1996a, 215-22; Blair, 1996b; Blair, 1998; and for comment see respectively Freedon, 1999; Burkitt and Ashton, 1996; Finlayson, 1999.

⁸ Even before the formulation of the New Deal the Labour Party had declared: “there will be no . . . option of remaining permanently on full benefit. Where there is a suitable offer, people will be expected to take this up. We believe this is fair - rights and responsibilities must go together’ (Labour Party, 1996b).

⁹ Although the Labour Party initially opposed the sale of council houses, New Labour has almost tried to make the policy its own with Mandelson and Liddle emphasising that a Labour Policy Unit had advocated such a policy in the 1970s only to find their proposal blocked by entrenched interests within the Party (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 12 and 225). Gould also makes clear the importance of the policy for the Party’s development (Gould, 1985, 19-20).

¹⁰ This paper draws on Bevir (2005, 54-83). An earlier version first appeared in British Journal of Politics and International Relations.