

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

New Labour: A Critique - Author's Introduction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rx689s5>

Journal

History of the Human Sciences, 1(19)

Author

Bevir, Mark

Publication Date

2006

Peer reviewed

New Labour: A Critique

By Mark Bevir

I. CONTACT INFORMATION

Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950

Email: mbevir@berkeley.edu

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).

New Labour: A Critique

New Labour: A Critique explores three overlapping contrasts – between positivism and interpretivism, expertise and dialogue, and the Third Way and the open community. The resulting book resembles a sandwich. The first and last chapters are the slices of bread: they consider different approaches to social science and different visions of social democracy. The other chapters are the filling: they consider the relationships among social sciences and social democracies through a study of New Labour.

The dual exploration of social science and social democracy works because New Labour has drawn heavily on modernist and positivist forms of social science – especially new institutionalism and communitarianism. So, when I offer a critique of mainstream social science, I also challenge many of New Labour's ideas and policies; and when I champion an interpretive approach to social science, I also point toward an alternative vision of social democracy. My general aim is to take us from positivism, expertise, and the Third Way toward interpretation, dialogue, and an open community.

The first chapter explores different social and political sciences. It concentrates on contrasts between positivism and interpretivism and between expertise and dialogue. To begin, it provides a historical account of the emergence of the social sciences with a particular emphasis on political science. This historical narrative provides a critical view of several varieties of modernist and positivist social science. It suggests that if we are to understand contemporary political science properly, we have to deploy an interpretive approach at odds with the mainstream. It also suggests that mainstream social science has acted less as a source of independent expertise than as a way of conceiving of objects

so as to make them governable. In the rest of the chapter, I offer a theoretical critique of mainstream social science. In particular, I exhibit the types of objectification associated with the leading approaches to political science – behaviouralism, institutionalism, and rational choice. I also explore various forms of interpretive social science to show how and why they too can encourage processes of objectification. Together my historical and theoretical explorations of social science provide an account and a defence of one variant of an interpretive approach. This approach focuses on practices composed of actions in flux. It explains actions by referring to the conscious, sub-conscious, and unconscious beliefs embedded in them. And it explains these beliefs by reference to historically contingent traditions, which situated agents modify as they respond to specific dilemmas.

Chapters two and three begin the task of interpreting New Labour in terms of beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas. They emphasize New Labour's debt to mainstream social science, especially the new institutionalism and communitarianism, arguing that these ideas have provided New Labour with a distinctive way of conceiving of – and so responding to – issues raised by neoliberalism and the New Right. Chapter two portrays the Third Way as a response from within a social democratic tradition to dilemmas posed by the New Right, a response that also draws on shifts in institutionalist social science in the wake of the rise of rational choice theory. New Labour reproduces institutionalist motifs in its view of the state and the economy. With respect to the state, New Labour promotes networks, partnerships, and zones as constitutive of a joined-up governance that is said to combine quality with efficiency. With respect to the economy, the elite of New Labour promote partnerships, civic entrepreneurialism, flexibility, and innovation.

In chapter three, I show how New Labour's changing views of the state and the economy entail a reworking of social democratic values. New Labour brings a greater concern with choice to the ideal of social justice, a greater concern with duty to that of citizenship, and a greater concern with competition to that of community. Typically this reworking of social democratic values has arisen not only from shifting ideas about the state and the economy but also from the impact on New Labour of communitarianism. The overlap of communitarianism and the new institutionalism within New Labour can be explained by tracing both of these forms of social science back to the broad modernist empiricism that arose in the early twentieth century.

Chapters four and five expand my interpretation of New Labour by focusing respectively on welfare reform and economic policy. All too often critics assume that an interpretive social science aims solely at an understanding of ideas as opposed to an explanation of actions and practices. In their view, interpretation might enable us to understand the meanings that bubble up on the surface of politics, but to explain these bubbles, we need to invoke deeper currents of interests, economic forces, or institutions. In contrast, I believe that that interests, economic forces, and institutions can influence actions only by way of people's beliefs about them, for all experiences are constructed in part by prior theories. Any adequate explanation of people's actions has to invoke their beliefs even if only implicitly. Hence when we point to the traditions and problems against the background of which people formed their beliefs, we explain why they hold the beliefs they do. Likewise when we unpack people's beliefs and desires, we explain their actions and the practices to which these actions give rise. Chapters four and five seek to illustrate the explanatory potential of an interpretive approach by showing how

the new institutionalism and communitarianism have informed the broad shape of New Labour's actions and policies within the public sector and the economy.

In the final chapter, I return to an explicit discussion of the contrasts that run through the book as a whole – those between positivism and interpretivism, expertise and dialogue, and the Third Way and the open community. The preceding chapters suggested how the Third Way exhibits the failings of New Labour's entanglement with mainstream social science. This chapter begins with a study of varied traditions of social democracy. New Labour remains wedded not only to a Fabian faith in social science but also a liberal account of democracy as representative government; it rarely refers to other forms of popular control over the executive. In contrast, non-governmental traditions of socialism concentrate on people making their own freedom through participation and deliberation in a range of practices. What might a participatory and deliberative alternative to the Third Way look like? Few non-governmental socialists want to repudiate liberal rights and liberties. They want to supplement them. In their view, freedom is not only abstract rights and liberties under a rule of law. It is concrete practices in specific circumstances. Hence while non-governmental socialists endorse many aspects of liberal democracy, they typically do so as part of an account of a practice of freedom that in other respects departs from liberal democracy. A suitable practice of freedom requires, I suggest, that we can debate and remake even the most entrenched liberal rights; it requires that we adopt other rights and devices so as to extend democracy to other areas of social life; and it requires that we decentre the state, even handing aspects of governance over to other associations. An interpretive approach to social science overlaps with social humanism

to inspire an open community characterized by pluralist democracy and dialogic policy-making.