

Whinge And A Prayer

Instead of carping from a position of scholastic isolation, thinks that academics such as Hobsbawm and Hall should come up with some practical solutions

Eric Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall are special intellectuals. Within their respective fields each stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries. During the 1980s both were hugely influential in helping the left to rethink its political strategy.

In their contributions here, they eloquently take up the charges that the Government is obsessed with presentation to the exclusion of content, that it has sold out to a right-wing agenda and given up on redistribution and social justice, or that it is run by control freaks.

All governments benefit from criticism. Without it they become complacent and arrogant. This one has made mistakes and I don't doubt that it will make mistakes in the future. But to be taken seriously any critic needs to pass two tests. First, are their criticisms fair and accurate? Second, do they point to any credible alternative?

Since I work for the Government, I have to declare an interest. Yet I suspect that few readers will feel that Hall and Hobsbawm have passed either test, and that if they had been told five years ago that in its first period in office a Labour government would have devolved power to Scotland and Wales, begun investing an extra £40bn in health and education, introduced the biggest programme to cut unemployment in British history, and wholly marginalised the Conservatives, not to mention bringing peace to Northern Ireland, they could not have hoped for more.

Against such a background the often angry and bitter tone of the criticisms seems misplaced. But what of the substance? Is there a serious critique here, or, behind the erudition and eloquence, are we being

offered little more than a jumble of assertions and woolly logic?

Let's start with their arguments about capitalism. There can be little doubt that capitalism is entering a period of profound crisis, with sharp downturns in east Asia, Russia and Latin America. As much as a third of the world is in recession, hedge funds are in crisis and banks are over-stretched. This much is common ground, and the fact that two marxist intellectuals should have decided that capitalism is unstable and unjust hardly counts as news.

But what should be done about it? New Labour's answer has been to launch a debate about a new Bretton Woods, and the potential for a new world financial authority. Around the world dozens of ideas are being floated and few still believe that all markets can somehow regulate themselves. At such a moment, you might expect Hall or Hobsbawm to offer their own ideas. Yet despite the verve of their attack on 1990s capitalism, they appear, astonishingly, to have nothing to say: nothing about whether there really is an alternative to capitalism, nothing about how capitalism might be humanised.

The problems get worse when the authors discuss neo-liberalism, which they claim is now all-powerful. This viewpoint is, to say the least, idiosyncratic. It ignores not only the fact that a succession of right-wing, neo-liberal governments have been thrown out of power, but also why this has happened: the fact that their societies became more unequal and more fragmented; the fact that the majority became less secure, fearful that they would lose the jobs, pensions and public services which underpinned their quality of life; and the fact that, far from delivering a cut in taxes and public spending, most simply shifted public spending from productive investment into the higher costs of social security and law and order.

This is the political background to the election of governments as diverse as those of Clinton, Jospin, Prodi, Schröder, Blair and Kok. It is why their political agenda is so very different from the neo-liberals. Somehow all of this appears to have passed by Hobsbawm and Hall.

What then of the next step in the argument: the claim that the Third Way has no substance, and represents nothing but submission to the right?

A few years ago this might have been a valid criticism. Back then the parties of the left were still trying to understand where they had gone wrong and why they had lost the public's confidence. A period of re-assessment left many parties wiser about the need to be tough on inflation, the folly of import and exchange controls, and about how competition and markets could sometimes serve progressive ends.

But today it is absurd to suggest that the parties of the centre-left have rejected the social democratic tradition. Today's centre-left governments still believe strongly in redistributing wealth and power, although they increasingly want to do this through opportunities to work and learn. They still believe in the role of active government,

although they increasingly believe that governments can be more effective if the public sector does not become a vested interest in its own right. They believe in liberty, although they are also sensitive that their electors' concerns about family and crime were not taken seriously enough by parties of the left in the 1970s and 1980s. They believe in citizenship but want to enrich it, like so many socialists in the 19th century, with a strong sense of responsibility and mutual commitment.

Hearing the very sweeping abstract generalisations of Hall and Hobsbawm one is left none the wiser what they think of any of this, let alone where they believe social democracy should be heading. Take, for example, their assertion that the left has given up on redistribution. If true, this really would mark a break from the past. Yet of course it isn't true. One of Labour's first acts was a £5bn tax on utilities to fund help for the unemployed, as clear-cut an act of redistribution as any modern government has undertaken. In France under Jospin and in Germany under Schröder, redistributive measures to create jobs for the unemployed are at the top of the political agenda.

So what is being criticised? Should the budget have been even more redistributive, and, if so, through what means? Are the steps that have been taken to reduce child poverty or pensioner poverty wrong, or just not enough? Again, we are left guessing.

The truth is that Thatcherism is no longer dominant. Tony Blair's speech to this year's Labour Party conference was as definitive a sign of the end of the Thatcher era as one could imagine. Again and again, he reasserted the continuing importance of the values of the centre-left, of community, compassion and public service. It is perhaps not surprising that the right-wing media have found it hard to come to terms with the end of right-wing hegemony. But it is ironic that parts of the left-wing intelligentsia should find it almost equally hard to acknowledge that history has moved on.

What is disappointing about this failure to engage is that it coincides with the most open, international and far-reaching debate about social democracy for many decades. Here in the UK, Tony Blair has deliberately launched the debate about the Third Way in an open manner, so as to encourage the widest possible discussion about the ends and means of radical change. Dozens of articles and pamphlets have appeared, seminars have been held all over the world, from 10 and 11 Downing Street to Washington, and from Brazil to Germany, and a plethora of organisations such as the Fabians, Demos, Nexus and the IPPR have offered practical proposals. Tony Blair's own recent pamphlet on the Third Way has been published in more than 40 countries.

For New Labour the prize is to synthesise the various traditions of the centre-left, social democracy, liberalism and progressivism, into a body of ideas that are sufficiently coherent and hard-edged to guide governments well into the next century. Only time will tell whether this is either

intellectually or politically feasible.

But it is already clear that many of the kneejerk responses to this approach do not stand up to analysis. One of the most common, and one which is repeated in these contributions, is the claim that politics cannot be 'both and' politics; it has to be 'either or'. So, for example, to be pro-business must mean being anti-worker, or to be pro-environment must mean being anti-business, or to be pro-public services means being anti-reform.

This sort of argument has an appealing neatness but it can be dangerously flawed. In a market economy, where most jobs are created by private sector investment, and where that investment depends on business confidence, you can either be pro-jobs or anti-business. But you can't be both. The same applies to public services. Some would claim that you cannot be simultaneously in favour of public services and tough in demanding high performance and modernisation. Yet if you want public services to be successful and legitimate, you can either be pro-public service or anti-modernisation. You cannot be both.

If logical flaws undermine many of the criticisms, others fall down simply because they are so obviously unfair. Take the very common criticism (repeated again here) that New Labour is concerned only with image, spin and presentation, and has become so terrified of the status quo that its programme is minimalist.

However easy it may have been to make such criticisms when Labour was in opposition, after nearly 18 months in government this line of attack has become a bit ridiculous. The sheer scale and range of what the government has introduced matches the first period of any government this century, and far exceeds the early achievements of the Thatcher government that the *Marxism Today* authors so admire. One can justly criticise what has been done; but one cannot seriously claim that the concern for presentation has been a substitute for substance.

It would have been interesting if instead of tilting at windmills, Hall and Hobsbawm had attempted a more serious analysis of New Labour's political strategy. There is a serious argument to be had about whether New Labour is right in its gradualist strategy of creating new political space, winning over new constituencies, and testing out ideas, so that at each stage there is more scope for radical change than before.

This generative politics, described by Tony Blair as 'permanent revisionism', marks a significant break from the past when all too often governments of the left launched explosive frenzies of reform only to crumble into disappointment and re-crimination soon after. I believe that it is one of the key reasons why, for the first time in my lifetime, there is a real prospect of progressive change continuing for more than one parliament. But I'm also sure that there are valid alternatives, and I would have been interested to read some serious assessments of what these might be.

Why, then, do such outstanding intellectuals offer such thin gruel when it comes to

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the politics of their own society? Some of the reasons may have to do with the traditional hostility of Hall's New Left and Hobsbawm's Communist Party to Labour governments. But part of the explanation, I suspect, also lies in the remarkable depoliticisation of intellectual life that has taken place over the last few decades.

In the past politically committed intellectuals saw themselves as harbingers of a new world in which the economy, education, politics and everyday life would be organised more justly. They were often argumentative, and often wrong; but they saw themselves as part of a movement for change, within society not outside of it.

Today, by contrast, much intellectual life is becalmed. Many of the left's best brains went to university in the 1960s and 1970s, and into a culture in which refereed journals are the main forum of discussion and critique is considered more highbrow than advocacy. Surprisingly few intellectuals are now actively involved in society, as councillors, activists, or school governors. Instead the world is viewed at second-hand, through books, and through books about books. As in parts of the media, an individualised culture has taken shape in which it is easier to be cynical, detached and opposed, rather than to run the risks, the emotional exposure, of being committed and engaged. The result is that although there are many eloquent critics, when you ask them how they would want things to be done differently, they stutter, and mumble, and are soon reduced to silence.

It is not that all intellectuals should be concerned with the minutiae of policy. Only a minority are, or should be. Historians tend to be best at history just as theorists tend to be best at theory. But in the past it was assumed that a mature political outlook meant a fairly clear sense of how society should be organised differently. Marx's later writings provided intellectual fuel for the parties of the First International. Gramsci's writings gave insights into political strategy. Tawney, Laski, Bevan and Benn could all offer fully formed political programmes, straddling the divide between high theory and day-to-day decisions.

Today, for much of the marxist and post-marxist left, there appears to be little interest in offering an alternative strategy. There is lots of big picture theory, but the picture is usually so fuzzy and ill-defined that it's not much use to anyone. Nor is there even much idealism. Previous generations of marxists promised to replace capitalism with a utopia in which true freedom would be realised, human potential liberated, the sick cured and the powerless empowered. Yet in the writings of today's marxists there is no echo of these high hopes, no ideals, nothing to strive for and not even much passion.

At most one gets fragmentary glimpses of what their alternative programme might look like; but all it adds up to is a bit more Keynesianism, a bit more redistribution, a bit less capitalism. But the arguments are made without any rigour, any edge or even any sense that they might matter.

Fortunately, although the tradition of abstract, high theory that traces its lineage through 1968, the Frankfurt School to Marx and Engels, has lost its voice, others committed to the ideals of the centre-left have remained engaged in radical change. Many of them are to be found in local politics, in the voluntary sector and in the professions.

After a barren period when the agenda was set by the right, the debate about social policy has probably never been livelier. Contemporary arguments about welfare reform and social exclusion, exemplify the very synthesis of theory and practice.

In the environmental world, for example, there is now a remarkably sophisticated debate, led by practical women and men and by intellectuals who are able to combine critique, vision and practical policy. Around schooling, healthcare and, democracy, radical intellectual argument is alive and well.

Few have fallen for the idea that the only choices are co-option or opposition. Instead, in each of these areas the propagators of ideas have remained critical and independent, while also being engaged.

Reading the marxists, by contrast, you sense the cloying atmosphere of the seminar room. Political ideas are discussed in the same way that one might discuss Mayan architecture or medieval history. They are there to be dissected, pulled apart, critiqued, observed from a distance. Society is viewed as if from outside, without any sense of membership or responsibility. Walter Benjamin once wrote of the 'peaceful negativity' of a certain type of intellectual, who lived safely detached from the world, able to criticise in the sure knowledge that they would never be called on to do anything or to risk anything for their beliefs, and oblivious of the lines written on Karl Marx's tombstone, that 'the philosophers have always interpreted the world; the point is to change it'.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was not the only reason why *Marxism Today* closed in the early 1990s. It also closed because critique was no longer enough. During the 1980s the left had had to come to terms with a changing world. During the 1990s it had to prepare for power. It was no longer enough for arguments to be interesting or eloquent: they also had to be realistic and practical.

Now the world has moved on again. We are now in a period of radical reform. Inevitably it involves mistakes and false turns. No government is perfect or infallible. But this one has got the important things right. It is delivering practical improvements, testing out more radical agendas and cultivating a far more vigorous and far-reaching debate, both here and abroad, than any Labour government has done before.

No doubt some intellectuals will find outright opposition attractive and comfortable. But I hope that most resist the temptations: not just because we need their talents and insights, but also because it would mean missing out on one of Britain's very rare periods of radical transformation.●

The Cultural Revolution

New Labour has gone out of its way to associate itself with all things cultural. But is unconvinced that it amounts to very much. Yet culture, she argues, is transforming politics and virtually everything else. We live in the era of culture

Let's get personal. Many years ago I went for an interview at a little publication called *Marxism Today* for the job of editing the back half of the magazine. It was the most intense interview I'd ever had and by the end it was clear that something was bothering Martin Jacques, the editor. The problem was that I was not a member of the Communist Party. Jacques more or less said, 'Well, Suzanne, we like you but we're concerned about your commitment to the project.' I'd never heard anyone talk like this before, so I chirpily responded, 'So what project's that?' Everyone shuffled around on their chairs and eventually Martin said, in a rather embarrassed manner, 'You know, the revolution.' 'Oh that, yeah, I'm into that.'

Anyway, all these years later, everyone is worried about everyone else's commitment to the project, so I am not alone. Clearly, there are a lot of different projects gathered together in the name of Blairism.

When I arrived at *Marxism Today*, one of my first jobs was renaming the section. I wanted to call it 'Culture' and we had long discussions about whether that sounded

too Soviet or not. In the late 1980s, remember, parts of the left were still embarrassed about the word 'culture', but obviously we were ahead of the times because today even the *Sunday Times* has a section called 'Culture'. In commercial terms, culture, often under the rubric of arts and features, is what sells magazines and newspapers of the left and right. Culture is still seen as what everyone does when they are not doing politics and by discussing the changing nature of cultural politics to politics with a capital 'P', I want to chart the changing relationship between the personal and the political.

For me, as for many people vaguely on the left in the 1980s, I think it is fair to say that culture had replaced politics as where it was at. Culture, however you want to define it, was seen as the place from which change could be generated. I was part of a generation who were so disenfranchised from traditional politics, that it was only logical that we moved into the culture industries of the arts, media and education because this

seemed the only space that true opposition to Thatcherism could come from. Left politics, as it was then constructed, had become a dead zone. The Labour Party was like a wounded dinosaur, anti-intellectual and so riven with internal strife that many saw no possibility of renewal, let alone excitement.

Culture, on the other hand, felt radical, groovy, progressive and, above all, popular. We saw in Thatcher a politician who truly understood the meaning of populism. A smidgen of lefty politics could be slipped into the cultural stew and no one would even notice because they would be having such a good time. The work of thinkers such as Stuart Hall and those at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had been an enormous liberation. To be able to say that sometimes popular culture could be as beautiful, profound and complex as sanctioned high culture was stimulating. It was to be suddenly in possession of what we already owned, what we already consumed and produced, a form of cultural stake-holding, if you like, that was implicitly democratic. We all worshipped Foucault and the idea that power was not elsewhere in Westminster but in every encounter, so that merely creating reverse discourses freed us up enormously. It also meshed nicely with a form of feminist politics that defined power far more subtly than traditional party politics had done. This nuanced understanding of power meant that we didn't have to bother with boring stuff like constitutional reform, or even poverty, because we could watch films and decode their radical subtext. We felt at one level profoundly connected to the real world, and at another level proudly disconnected from the world of politics as it had been historically delineated.

No3 Veal meat again



MARTIN GODWIN