Introduction

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Interpreting the Labour Party is an attempt to take stock of how some of the British Labour Party's leading interpreters have analysed their subject, deriving as they do from contrasting political, theoretical, disciplinary and methodological backgrounds. The book explores their often-hidden assumptions and subjects them to critical evaluation. In introducing this collection, we position the various chapters within a wider context and draw out some of their most striking implications.

It is important to remind ourselves from the outset that all students of the Labour Party – including the authors of this Introduction and those reading it – adhere to some prior analytical–interpretive framework deriving from diverse theoretical positions. This is not something for which anyone should be criticised, for as E. H. Carr stated many years ago (1964), without some such intellectual setting the apparently highly potent ‘fact’ can have no meaning. It could be argued, indeed, that ‘the facts’ themselves are often the product of persuasive theories and interpretive arguments. While these propositions might seem uncontroversial when stated in general terms, once applied to a particular subject, in which analysts have invested much time and energy, their implications can arouse controversy. For if scholars are able to agree on certain ‘facts’, few of them are willing to concede without a fight that their reading of those facts is in any way flawed.

The study of the Labour Party is especially prone to interpretive dispute because it is inherently politicised. Many of those who have written about Labour – for example, Henry Pelling – have at one time or another been party members who identified with one or other of its ideological factions. A number have belonged to groupings, usually, like Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, to Labour's Left, which have hoped to replace the party in the affections of the working class. More than a few of them – like Ralph Miliband and David Marquand – have been, at different periods in their lives, on both sides of the fence. Those writing from such committed positions have sometimes conceived of the party in teleological terms. That is, they thought it to be an ineluctable force whose destiny was to fulfil a historic mission, the nature of which could be anything from narrowly electoral to broadly anti-systemic. Such an approach is less obvious today, when so few believe in the prospect of establishing a social democratic – let alone a socialist – Britain. Indeed,

those who retain some hope that socialism remains possible – in particular those dubbed ‘Milibandian’ – consider that Labour was never that type of party. In contrast, some observers have eschewed overt political involvement, although their work should not be considered inherently more reliable because of that. For it is impossible not to be influenced by the political conjuncture in which one lives, just as it is difficult to see beyond the intellectual, cultural and academic verities of one’s day. The appearance of objectivity can never be more than superficial: indeed, it might be suggested, there are none more ideological than those who claim to disavow ideology altogether.

This volume aims to provide insights about what have often been the hidden assumptions of some of Labour’s leading interpreters and seeks to explain how they have coloured our picture of the party. The approaches considered here are invariably the result of complex aggregates of theories, methods and empirical evidence. There is often much overlap between different interpretations, for while its authors may make use of broadly the same component parts the novelty of their arguments often lies in their application or arrangement of those elements. Even the same combination of parts can contain important differences of emphasis and so produce contrasting conclusions. In such subtle ways do the motives, political affiliations and moods of the authors express themselves. Moreover, while such factors are sometimes made explicit, there are other influences at work in constructing a particular perspective which are frequently left covered over. The ruling beliefs of the day, the endemic assumptions and intellectual habits of an individual, a generation or a school of thought, may simply be taken for granted. Some, if not all, of these predilections may not be referred to in the text, escaping the critical attention of both author and reader.

To reiterate, everything written about the Labour Party, whether by scholars, activists or journalists, has strong normative underpinnings. Any full appreciation of the party therefore requires some assessment of the intellectual means through which it has been perceived. When all is said and done, Labour’s historic purpose has been to challenge or at least temper, in one way or another, the power of the most dynamic economic and social system in history – capitalism. If such a subject does not arouse partisanship, nothing will.

Rationale for the collection

The chapters gathered here were selected from papers presented to the second conference of the Political Studies Association’s Labour Movements Group, held in Manchester in July 2001. This gathering grew out of the group’s commitment to create arenas in which researchers, drawn from different academic disciplines and contrasting research agendas, can share their work. It already has a large and diverse membership, composed of adherents to a variety of political, disciplinary and methodological perspectives united in the desire to better understand the Labour Party and the wider labour movement, both in Britain and elsewhere in the world. The group is always keen to attract new members, and its website is an invaluable research resource (Labour Movements Group 2002).

As with this collection, the main purpose of that conference was to highlight how students of the party have analysed their subject. In particular, the organisers hoped to traverse one of the disciplinary divisions that have hitherto hampered the development of a more rounded appreciation of the party: that which demarcates historians from political scientists. This is no new concern. During the early 1960s the first conferences of the Society for the Study of Labour History attracted the participation of political scientists as politically diverse as Robert McKenzie and Ralph Miliband. Despite this, the society went on to embrace traditional historical concerns and methods, leaving little room for such figures (Fielding 2002). More recently, in their individual contributions to the Labour literature members of the Labour Movements Group have brought together the concerns of history and political science to illuminating effect. Despite the advantages of this approach, however, it remains a minority pursuit.

The divide between history and politics has resulted in work that, whatever its intrinsic merits, is often more limited than it might otherwise be. In particular, many political scientists have fallen foul of the assumptions that theoretical elaboration is intellectually superior to empirical research and that all contemporary trends are somehow novel (Callaghan 2002). In contrast, most historians have eschewed the insightful theoretical labours of political scientists and been guilty of promoting a view of the past as a foreign country set apart from the travails of the present day. It could be argued that it would be best to locate analysis of the Labour Party in what Colin Hay (chapter 12) suggests should be a ‘post-disciplinary’ labour studies that incorporates insights from economics and sociology, along with those of history and politics. This is undoubtedly correct, but for the time being the proper harmonising of the work of historians and political scientists would be a major step forward.

Drawing the two disciplines together would be especially helpful at this present juncture. At the time of writing, Labour is widely referred to as ‘New’ Labour. This term has given rise to a keen debate about the extent to which the contemporary party forms either a break or continuum with what is described as ‘Old’ Labour (Bale 1999; Fielding 2003; Ludlam and Smith 2001). While it is not their main purpose, the chapters that follow help frame this debate in both historical and theoretical terms, though of course that does not mean they arrive at a common conclusion about the significance of present-day events.

The chapters

As this collection makes clear, academic analysis of the Labour Party – like the party itself – has never stood still. Over the years, historians and political scientists interested in the party have amended their analytical agendas in response to wider intellectual trends as well as to Labour’s own capricious electoral course. This point is elaborated in chapters 1 and 2. Nick Randall (chapter 1) notes the wide variety of approaches to studying ideological change in the Labour Party and identifies five principal explanatory strategies: materialist; ideational; electoral; institutional; and those which synthesise some or all of these. Limitations in many widely

read texts are discussed and, echoing the final chapter, by Colin Hay, Randall concludes by calling for a multidimensional approach that would reject, among other things, what he considers the artificial opposition of structure to agency.

Lawrence Black (chapter 2) considers the 'new political history' by way of a comparison with earlier 'realist' analyses of the party which explained its historical development with almost exclusive reference to the social nature of the electorate. He argues that the former view does more than counter social explanations by restoring agency to the party, along with other more directly political factors. For the 'new political history' also questions what it is that the category 'politics' might encapsulate and how it can be represented and contested. The proximity and ordering of party-voter relations are thus problematised, and Black reflects on the imperfect and distorted perceptions which often characterise how academics have understood these relations.

Reflecting the preoccupations of many of those who currently study Labour, the main focus of this collection falls on the party's postwar interpreters. Yet, even given that shortened time frame, there have been many contrasting currents in interpretation that have ebbed and flowed in their influence, as intellectual fashions and political events left their mark. The rest of the chapters of this book can be seen as falling into two main categories. The first involves an assessment of those who can be usefully described as New Left analysts: in their different ways they have promoted a very influential and deeply critical analysis of the Labour Party. This work has broadly assumed that Labour – at least during the 1950s–1970s – impeded the transformation of capitalism into socialism. The most ambitious of these New Left theorists were Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, who situated Labour in the extremely broad historical context of capitalist development and class formation in Britain since the English Civil War. This analysis was strongly informed by the postwar perception of Britain's industrial decline and its relation to an imperial and post-imperial global financial role serving the interests of the City of London. Madeleine Davis (chapter 3) focuses on the New Left's idea of 'labourism', a venerable notion given new life by this analysis. Mark Wickham-Jones (chapter 6) looks at one of the assumptions underpinning that concept: Labour's supposed isolation from the rest of European social democracy. Both, however, consider the shifting political projects of the New Left in relation to its developing analysis of the Labour Party over the last forty years.

As other contributions show – for example, chapter 8, by John Callaghan – Anderson and Nairn have been hugely influential. Even so, it was Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*, first published in 1961, which best captured the New Left's frustration with Labour. Miliband's biographer Michael Newman (chapter 4) traces the intellectual roots of this powerful critique. He reveals that its argument was widely misinterpreted by contemporaries largely because the author was himself uncertain whether Labour would ever become the vehicle for his kind of socialism. Miliband eventually concluded that the party was fated to remain 'labourist' after despairing of the 1964–70 Wilson Government's policies. From the mid-1960s he therefore dismissed Labour as wholly dependent on capitalism and, indeed, came to see its ability to win the support of most working-class voters as

one means by which the status quo was maintained. As Newman also shows, the party's move to the Left during the 1970s and 1980s forced Miliband to revise this view, although he nevertheless remained highly sceptical of the party's potential to engineer fundamental social and economic change.

Since the 1970s David Coates and Leo Panitch have produced numerous works in the 'Milibandian' mould that have made a significant impact on perceptions of the Labour Party. Their contribution (chapter 5) mounts a robust defence of the continuing relevance to both historical and contemporary analysis of this still-controversial perspective. They indicate the extent to which Milibandians have extended their inspiration's original insights by incorporating within their own work the concerns of international political economy. This has imbued them with a perspective far wider than that possessed by most students of the party, who tend to focus on the internal party mechanics and remain trapped within national boundaries. Thus, Milibandians can now claim to possess a unique insight on the wider implications of 'New' Labour policy, based as it is on certain contestable assumptions regarding 'globalisation'.

The second category consists of chapters on figures whose work, while couched in less obviously theoretical terms, proceed from a contrasting set of assumptions that might be regarded as broadly social democratic in orientation. Henry Pelling was one of the leading postwar historians of the Labour Party who wrote a number of founding texts during the 1950s and 1960s. In relation to the more overtly theoretical work of Miliband that resonated among the radical student audience of the 1960s and 1970s, Pelling appeared the epitome of dull empiricism. Alastair Reid, in chapter 7, rescues Pelling from such a dismissive appraisal and shows how far he defined his early work through an engagement with prevailing ideological currents which traced their origins to the basic concerns of Marxist scholarship. Pelling, who sympathised with the Labour leadership's social democratic outlook, came to conclusions at variance with those of others who, like Miliband, were critical of the party leadership's apparent lack of desire to transform capitalism into socialism. Steven Fielding and Declan McHugh (chapter 9) subject to critical appraisal the work of another – but later – social democratic interpreter. David Marquand's *The Progressive Dilemma*, first published in 1991, has had a profound influence over recent perceptions of party history. Indeed, it has been used to justify 'New' Labour's attempt to increase its appeal to middle-class voters by distancing the party from the trade unions and public ownership. The authors view Marquand's analysis as indicative of a particular moment in the development of social democratic thinking, which has hitherto been less critical of the party's character. They also question some of Marquand's historical assumptions, which are derived from one side of a debate about the inevitability of Labour's rise to the status of a national party during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Without some understanding of the party's unique and complex relationship with the working class in general and the trade unions in particular, a full appreciation of Labour in Britain is impossible. John Callaghan (chapter 8) analyses Ross McKibbin's approach to that relationship which roots the evolution of the Labour Party, and the limits to its growth, in the consciousness and cultures of organised

(and unorganised) labour in the first decades of the twentieth century. McKibbin supplies a richly suggestive explanation of why this truly proletarian party was unable to break the electoral hegemony of the Conservative Party until the Second World War. Class and class consciousness are central to this account, although in ways which frustrated 'the forward march' of Labour. Callaghan shows how McKibbin's work draws upon and develops assumptions concerning the 'special path' of working-class development in Britain, and highlights the absence from this body of theory of the sort of rigorous comparative analysis which such arguments presume.

Two chapters deal directly with interpretations of the unions-party link – the labour alliance that has had such a profound influence on Labour's development. In chapter 10 Steve Ludlam outlines the two principal scholarly approaches that have characterised the bulk of postwar work on this link: that of pluralistic theorists and social democrats; and that of Marxist theorists and socialists. He illustrates their main features, and some of their limitations, through an analysis of the unions-party link during the particularly tense period between 1974 and 1983. Thus, Ludlam calls for the disaggregation and sectoral understandings of 'the unions', and for an awareness of the purchase of underlying axioms of liberal political economy. Lewis Minkin's work on the unions-party link is almost unique in its focus. Eric Shaw (chapter 11) performs a great service to students of the party by clarifying Minkin's explanatory mode, analytical categories, and conceptual framework. In doing so he shows how Minkin exposed the fallacies of rational actor models that underpinned the myth of 'baronial' union leaders' domination of the party, and constructed instead a sociological model that reveals the "rules", roles and relations' which explain how the 'contentious alliance' functions.

In the final contribution (chapter 12) Colin Hay, one of the leading interpreters of 'New' Labour, sketches out an ambitious theoretical framework within which students of the contemporary party might locate their analysis. This takes account of what Hay terms the 'new political science', at the heart of which is 'reflexivity', that is an approach more self-critical about its analytical hypotheses than has hitherto been the case. It might be thought that if past students of the party had practised such reflexivity collections such as this would be unnecessary. Hay's chapter is not, however, meant to establish an agreed agenda for future work on Labour, as no collective programme emerged from the conference. As the reader will have been able to discern, each contributor to this collection, just like those whose work they analyse, has his or her own particular point of view. However, the editors would wish to endorse at least the broad thrust of Hay's perspective. A greater openness to alternative points of view, a more developed self-critical awareness and a willingness to lay one's theoretical cards on the table would indeed be very welcome. The editors wish, in addition, to stress the need to break down apparently 'common-sense' terms such as the 'trade unions', 'labour movement' and especially, of course, the 'Labour Party'. Rather than simply taking them for granted, it would be useful for analysts to think first about what they might mean. Finally, while Hay's own chapter illustrates that theoretical work can greatly illuminate our appreciation of the party, students need to pay due account to

historical context, however inconvenient the messy details of Labour's past may sometimes appear.

This collection does not claim to be comprehensive. The work of the historian K. O. Morgan and the earlier historian and theorist G. D. H. Cole, for example, might well have found a place within its covers. There is no contribution on the feminist interpretation of the Labour Party either. It is, however, broadly representative of current scholarship and the diverse postwar corpus of work on the party in which the authors have been schooled. In holding up to critical evaluation those such as Anderson and Nairn, McKibbin, Marquand, Miliband, Minkin and Pelling, we are, in a rather perverse way perhaps, merely paying tribute to their work and acknowledging our intellectual indebtedness to them.

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Unless indicated, the place of publication is London.

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