3

'Labourism' and the New Left

Madeleine Davis

This chapter assesses the contribution made to analysis of the Labour Party and labour history by thinkers of the British New Left. In part constituted in opposition to old left tendencies, including Labour, the British New Left took an independent, broadly Marxist, position. Its thinkers thus offered theoretically informed analyses of the party and its role – mainly, as will be seen, in terms of the category *labourism* – that were highly critical. They were preoccupied in particular with the question of whether the Labour Party and movement could be the carrier of socialist ideas and policies, and, for the most part, concluded that it could not. Despite this, New Left activists and thinkers were at various times involved in practical political interventions which were aimed at pushing the party in a leftward direction. At other times (or even simultaneously) New Left intellectuals insisted on the need for the creation of a new political vehicle, leftward of Labour, and in competition with it. Yet attempts to create such a vehicle were only half-heartedly pursued. Overall, then, it must be said at the outset that the New Left displayed a profound ambivalence in its attitude to Labour. Despite the prevalence of analyses which were inclined to view the Labour Party's role as functional for the maintenance of British capitalism, and the Party as in some senses a positive obstacle to change in a leftward direction, the New Left in its various manifestations remained unable to offer any resolution of the strategic political problem posed for socialists by the party's existence and pre-eminence among the organisations of the Left.

What must also be noted from the outset is that, given the ideological trajectory the Labour Party has followed, and the balance of its electoral fortunes during the period in question (from 1956 to the present), New Left interpretations of Labour have been somewhat marginal in political terms. Yet, notwithstanding these caveats, New Left critiques have furnished us with insights which continue to offer a fruitful avenue for explanation and analysis of New Labour and the contemporary British political scene. What is enduringly distinctive and valuable about New Left critiques of Labour and labourism is that they have sought to place analysis of the party, its history and its role within the broadest possible context. Also crucial has been the theoretical context – writers of the New Left have been concerned to

apply the gains of a broadened corpus of Marxist theory (especially Gramscism) to their analysis of labour, and this too makes their contribution somewhat distinctive. I argue in this chapter that New Left writers, influenced by a Milibandian perspective but also developing new ones, have made a useful and still relevant contribution to interpretations of labour. I argue also that, notwithstanding this contribution, the New Left has not proved able to offer any solution to the intractable political problem the party poses for socialists – whether to work within or outside it. This apparent conundrum can be understood only in the context of an appreciation of the complex and contradictory nature of the New Left and its legacy, and in particular of its inability to resolve the central question of agency.

The early New Left and Labour

The term 'New Left' is generally used to describe the diffuse and widespread radicalism which developed during the late 1950s and which culminated in the world-wide wave of revolt best exemplified by the May 1968 events in France. As students of the New Left have established, what the multiplicity of movements, initiatives and writers who made up the New Left shared was a profound disillusionment with existing forms of political activity, thought and organisation, whether of Left or Right, and a corresponding desire to occupy a 'new space' in politics. Britain was among the earliest to develop a New Left current (Chun 1993; Kenny 1995). Unlike some of its counterparts elsewhere, here the New Left was predominantly an intellectual tendency, institutionally identified with certain key publishing or academic enterprises, and formed initially by the coming together of two more or less distinct generations of intellectuals. Real differences of emphasis attended the shift from the 'first' to the 'second' New Left, but key questions for both centred around the issue of radical agency, and in particular the relationship of intellectuals to society and the labour movement.

In its early – 'movementist' – phase, the New Left actually *embodied* in its own structure and practices the very questions about agency and the relation of intellectual to political work which it sought to address. For a brief period it attempted to be the organising and intellectual pivot of a genuine New Left movement, which, it was thought, would occupy a new space in politics. This attempt, though brave and valuable, was ultimately unsuccessful, because these crucial questions to which the New Left gave form remained unresolved.

The strategy adopted in relation to the Labour Party by the early New Left's main protagonists was that of 'parallelism'. This necessitated both a separateness from and a dialogue with the party. On the one hand, it was considered vital for the New Left's political project to eschew any organisational links, party controls and discipline, while, on the other, there was a clear recognition of the party's hegemonic status in working-class politics, and of the centrality of its role in left-wing politics. As Hall (1989: 34) has recalled, the first New Left

remained deeply critical of the Fabian and Labourist cultures of the Labour Party, of its 'statism', its lack of popular roots in the political and cultural life of ordinary people, its bureaucratic suspicion of any independent action or 'movement' outside its limits,

and its profound anti-intellectualism. We opposed the deeply undemocratic procedures of the block vote and the Party's empty 'constitutionalism'. Yet we knew that the Labour Party represented, whether we liked it or not, the strategic *stake* in British politics, which no one could ignore.

Here, as with its Marxism, the New Left tried to adopt a 'third' position, opposing both the acceptance of capitalism implied by Gaitskell and Crosland, and the effective refusal by the Labour Left to accept that a new analysis was necessary for the post-war situation. With its 'one foot in, one foot out' approach, the New Left spoke of a 'break back' of their ideas into the party, which could lead to a peaceful revolution. E. P. Thompson (1960: 7) spoke in terms of

interpenetrating opposites . . . it is not a case of *either this or that* . . . It is possible to look forward to a peaceful revolution in Britain, not because it will be a semi-revolution, nor because capitalism is 'evolving' into socialism, but because the advances of 1942–8 *were* real, because the socialist *potential* has been enlarged, and socialist forms, however imperfect, have grown up 'within' capitalism.

This dialectical approach was clarified by Saville (1960: 9) when he argued for the translation of theory into practice, and the embracing of all forms of Left activity:

Such activities will, inevitably, take new organisational forms, sometimes wholly within the Labour Party, sometimes without, sometimes half-in half-out – (i.e. involving many Labour Party people and seeking to influence the party, but not restricted to or limited by it) . . . At the same time, a genuine forward move involves a) replacement of the present leadership of the party, and b) the development of political forms which will enable the Left to grow within the Labour movement.

This, then, was the strategy, but how did it work in practice? The unilateralist victory at the 1960 Labour Party Conference provides the clearest example of New Left influence succeeding in altering party policy (though not for long). For some, the lesson of this experience was that the New Left should involve itself more closely with internal Labour Party matters, while by others it was seen as a 'defeat-in-victory', which illustrated the capacity of the party machine to encompass and neutralise new positions. For this group, the imperative to maintain independence from the party and continue to build a base outside it was strengthened by this experience.

Yet the New Left was reluctant to sponsor initiatives which would place it in direct competition with the Labour Party. The one real attempt to build an alternative New Left political platform was made by Lawrence Daly's Fife Socialist League. Daly's astonishing victory as an independent candidate in local elections in Ballingry in 1958, followed by his decision to contest West Fife in the 1959 general election, raised the possibility of constructing a distinctive New Left political organisation, in direct competition with traditional parties. After some debate, the *New Reasoner* group decided to support Daly, but very significantly *not* as exemplifying some general principle of support for Independent New Left electoral candidates. Its ambivalent attitude and half-hearted support for such initiatives amounted to a failure of nerve which limited the effectiveness of the 'parallel'

strategy; and, in the context of the conflict at the core of the early New Left – whether it was a journal of ideas or a movement of people – suggested a leaning toward the former. Inability or unwillingness to create a genuine popular base *of its own*, together with the decline of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and, later, of the New Left clubs, and the gradual shift of emphasis toward accepting the production of a journal as its major responsibility, led in practice towards greater acceptance of the Labour Party as the *only* vehicle for socialist transformation. The need to build both inside and outside the party was repeatedly stated, but there were few practical attempts, or even concrete plans, to do this.

With the decline of CND and the local clubs, the 'movement' phase of the New Left was coming to an end, and its relationship with the Labour Party altered. Parallelism as a strategy was fatally weakened by the demise of the parallel organisations on which it depended. The accession of Harold Wilson to the leadership in 1962 also seemed to create more favourable conditions for the New Left to influence policy formation, and it revived hopes for a change in the direction of the party. For the most part, these hopes were not to be realised. The story of the early New Left's struggle for the 'soul of Labour' was one in which it was continually outmanoeuvred and failed to engage with a clear purpose or a real understanding of the problem confronting it. For Raymond Williams (1979: 365), in retrospect, it seemed that the mistake the New Left made was never to take the Labour Party seriously enough:

There was a general sense that given its integration into the world of NATO capitalism, it was a negligible organisation: while the marches were so big, and left clubs were springing up all over the country, this outdated institution could be left to expire . . . There was no idea of the strengths of the Labour machine, or of the political skill which the right was able to organise for victory within it.

Critiques of labourism

It was not until after the early New Left had declined that sustained and theoretically informed analyses of the Labour Party and movement began to be offered by New Left thinkers. Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* was published in 1961, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's series of essays followed in 1964–65, and other New Left figures including Williams and Saville also wrote regularly on the subject in the pages of the *New Left Review* (NLR) or *The Socialist Register*. Though the nuances of interpretation varied among these individuals, the use of the term 'labourism' to denote the limitations placed upon the party by its particular history, ideology and structure, and above all, what Miliband (1972: 13) called its 'devotion to the parliamentary system' was a common feature.

This was not, in itself, a wholly new way of looking at Labour. New Left critiques of labourism in fact represented and continued a strand of Marxist thinking on the party that can be traced back to its inception. John Saville was to acknowledge the particular debt owed in this regard by the New Left to Theodore Rothstein, a Lithuanian Jewish Marxist who spent much of his career as a political journalist and writer in London and whose essays on the subject, written from 1905 onward,

were published in 1929 as *From Chartism to Labourism: Historical Sketches of the English Working Class Movement*.

Rothstein's analysis foreshadowed many of the criticisms of the Labour Party that were later to be made by New Left commentators. The major concern of Rothstein, as it was for them also, was with the weakness of revolutionary socialism in Britain. As early as 1898 he had posed the question: 'Why is socialism in England at a discount?', and he concluded that it was the specific character of 'labourism' that had much to answer for (1929: xxi). Encompassed in his analysis was a critique of the reformism and economism of the trade unions, the prevalence of sectionalism within the working class, and also an interpretation of the role of the British State and the bourgeoisie in informing and reinforcing what he saw as the 'non-political, opportunistic and counter-revolutionary' consciousness of the working class (1929: 276). Viewing the native socialist tradition as limited, an offshoot of liberalism rather than a result of revolutionary sentiment among the working class, he blamed the failure of Marxist ideas to take root, in part, on their foreignness to the already established traditions of labourism. Rothstein was also deeply critical of both the Fabian and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) traditions, concluding that even for the latter 'parliamentary activity seemed the highest form of political action' (1929: 279). Of the Labour Party up to the 1920s, he judged that 'its fortunes have most strikingly confirmed the fact that opportunist ideology presented an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a genuine, potentially revolutionary, political class struggle of the proletariat' (1929: 281).

All these themes were later to be taken up and amplified by writers of the New Left, though, as I show, with slight differences of emphasis. The specific contribution of Ralph Miliband is discussed elsewhere in this volume and so will not be treated at length here. The parallels between his work and Rothstein's, however, are clear. The interpretation of labourism offered by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson in the pages of *NLR* in the mid-1960s had similarities with both Rothstein's and Miliband's, though the two authors referred to neither. Anderson and his collaborators, critical of the early New Left for its populist tone and for sacrificing intellectual and theoretical work in favour of 'a mobilising role which perpetually escaped it' (Anderson 1965a: 17), set out with the bold aim of transforming the intellectual culture of Britain, which they viewed as a pre-requisite of any real socialist advance, by introducing and applying Marxist thought drawn mainly from continental Europe. The Nairn-Anderson theses thus represented an ambitious attempt to pioneer a distinctive analysis of British capitalist development, its state, society and class structure.

Despite a number of shortcomings, some justly identified by E. P. Thompson in his excoriating and famous 1965 attack, what was distinctive and valuable about the Nairn-Anderson project was its attempt to interpret 'the present crisis' diagnosed by Anderson with the historical and structural features of British capitalist development. The theoretical rigour of this enterprise ensured that its interpretation of labourism was something of an advance on previous Left critiques. As is well known, Nairn and Anderson identified various 'peculiarities' or specificities of British history as vital to its subsequent development (Anderson 1964; Nairn

1964a, 1964b and 1964c; for a reassessment see Anderson 1987). These can be summarised into certain key positions having to do with, first, the nature of the British State and establishment, particularly in terms of its class composition, second, the nature of labourism and, third, its intellectual culture.

The major hypothesis advanced was that the nature and development of the British State and its social classes had been crucially conditioned by an historic compromise, or alliance, between agrarian (aristocratic) and mercantile (bourgeois) capitalism. This compromise, which Anderson considered 'the single most important key to modern English history' (1964: 31), was related to certain peculiarities of British history: the absence of any 'true' bourgeois revolution (France was the implicit model); the priority of the industrial revolution; and the experience of empire. From this essentially materialist beginning, Anderson and Nairn went on to emphasise the cultural and ideological consequences, arguing that these historical peculiarities enabled the ruling bloc to impose its own worldview on the rest of society; in Gramscian terms, it was a genuinely hegemonic class. This worldview was characterised as a 'comprehensive conservatism' (Anderson 1964: 40), whose main pillars were empiricism and traditionalism, and which reflected and recreated aristocratic cultural and material values. All this was linked to the idea that the bourgeoisie had never stood in real opposition to the aristocracy, there had never been a full bourgeois revolution and Enlightenment rationalism had never fully replaced the *ancien régime*. The bourgeoisie in England failed to live up to its supposed historical destiny, did not become a fully hegemonic class and so did not develop an 'authentic articulated ideology' (Anderson 1964: 41) to challenge Conservative hegemony.

The history of the Labour Party and movement, for Nairn and Anderson, had to be placed in this context. Developing Anderson's argument (1964: 43) that 'a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate proletariat', Nairn identified the high point of working-class struggle with the Chartist movement, a movement which collapsed before *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1848) was written. The lack of availability of socialist theory to the working class, together with its exhaustion after Chartism, and the lack of any experience of a Jacobin alliance with a modernising bourgeoisie, were seen as contributing to a period of quiescence in the nineteenth century, when other working classes in Europe were coming under the influence of Marxist ideas. When working-class activism reconstituted itself, it did so on profoundly moderate and reformist lines.

From that basis, a particular analysis of the Labour Party and movement as a subordinate and corporatist entity was developed. Nairn and Anderson used the term *labourism* to encompass both the Labour Party and the labour movement, influenced by the Gramscian stricture, paraphrased by Nairn (1964c: 39) as 'the history of a party . . . cannot fail to be the history of a given social class'. They alleged that labourism was both defined and limited by a number of key characteristics: the pre-eminence of the trade unions; the inherent weakness of indigenous British socialism and the Labour Left; the acceptance of parliamentarism; and the failure of intellectuals to forge a counter-hegemonic ideology. The Labour Party itself was understood as an entity which, while being based on the myth of

'broad church' unity, was actually defined and constituted by the structural subordination of the Left (identified at first with the ILP's ethical socialism) to the Right (identified with the Fabians – pragmatic and competent reformers). Nairn called the Fabians the intellect of the Labour Party and the Left its emotions or subjectivity. The existence of this Left within the party functioned partly to legitimise and reinforce right-wing hegemony within it; the battle in 1960 over Clause 4 was seen as a classic example; with the Left arguing for the maintenance of traditional socialist principles (to which in practice only lip-service had ever been paid) on sentimental grounds. In reality, Nairn argued, the Labour Party was a bundle of disparate forces united by the myth of the possibility of an evolutionary path to socialism.

Although the rift between the first and second New Left groupings meant that dialogue and collaboration between them was patchy, other New Left writers, most notably Williams and Saville, also contributed through the 1960s and 1970s to what we might now regard as a distinctive New Left interpretation of Labour. Saville, like Miliband, treated the party's history predominantly in terms of what he saw as its consistent failure to press for socialist policies. His position, like Miliband's and the *NLR* writers', hardened when it became clear that the 1964–70 Wilson Government was not going to deliver socialist policies nor effect far-reaching alteration to the structures of the Labour Party – such had been the hope, if not the expectation, of prominent New Left theorists upon Wilson's accession to power. For Saville and others, the Labour Party's refusal to take a stand against the American intervention in Vietnam seemed to confirm the (reluctant) conclusion that not only was the party unable to effect radical change, but that its role was actually functional for the maintenance of British capitalism. By the later 1960s Saville (1967: 67) was asserting:

Labourism has nothing to do with socialism . . . the Labour Party has never been, nor is it capable of becoming, a vehicle for socialist advance, and . . . the destruction of the illusions of Labourism is a necessary step before the emergence of a socialist movement of any size and influence becomes practicable.

Saville's analysis of labourism was similar to Nairn and Anderson's in its emphasis on the importance of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class and the role this played in preventing the development of an independent party of the working class, or a fully developed class consciousness. Thus labourism for him was 'the theory and practice of class collaboration' (1975: 215).

The critics of labourism criticised

By the late 1960s, then, a distinctive interpretation of the history and role of the Labour Party and movement had been offered by New Left writers, around the central organising concept of labourism. Particularly in its Anderson–Nairn variant, this is an interpretation which has been subjected to a number of criticisms, some of them from thinkers associated at one time or another with the New Left itself. Criticism has tended to focus on two main areas. Firstly, critics have alleged an

excessive schematism or theoretical abstraction, and a corresponding a-historicism. E. P. Thompson (1965), for instance, famously dismissed the entire Nairn–Anderson enterprise as representative of a reductionist Marxism which eschewed real historical analysis, while two other thinkers also associated with the New Left, Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (1982: 325), were inclined to dismiss the whole category of 'labourism' as offered by Miliband, Anderson and Nairn, arguing:

What the New Left analysis offered was not a complex location of the history of the Labour Party in specific historical contexts, but rather an eloquent and polemically brilliant phenomenology of a set of 'enduring reflexes', partially embodied in a set of institutions but mainly hovering like a dense mental fog over the low-lying ideological terrain on which the Labour Party operated . . . As a savage and innovatory indictment of the malaise of the Labour Party and labour movement in the late 1950s and 1960s the New Left critique is justly famous. But as a stand in for the history of the Labour Party, it will not do.

A second, and related, charge has been that the New Left analysis of labourism failed to appreciate the importance of indigenous working-class culture, the native roots and variants of radicalism, and, correspondingly, too hastily dismissed the entire Labour tradition as non-socialist. E. P. Thompson, who in his own work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) argued that the working class *made itself* as much as it was made, insisted upon the strength and resilience of working-class institutions and took strong exception to Anderson and Nairn's depiction of the working class as irretrievably subordinate and reformist in consciousness. He and others, from a socialist–humanist perspective, argued that Anderson and Nairn (though the same criticism could also to some extent be applied to Miliband and Saville) were implicitly likening the English experience of class and capitalist development to a hidden 'ideal type', and in their implied insistence that socialism had to be Marxist and revolutionary in character were rejecting out of hand indigenous forms of radicalism as both non-socialist and reformist.

Both these strands of criticism somewhat miss their mark if we view (as I argue that we should) the New Left critique of labourism offered by Miliband, the *NLR* writers, Saville and Williams, as a whole – as a developing strand of analysis with a number of contributors. Critics were correct to identify a lack of serious and close historical studies of the Labour Party from a leftist perspective, but, as Samuel and Stedman Jones (1982: 323) themselves noted, this was a result of a bias in Left labour history in general, the prime motivation of which had long been the search for 'an *alternative* non social-democratic tradition'. Thus labour historians had either tended to focus on traditions of dissent and radicalism in opposition to the mainstream, or (like the New Left) been primarily concerned to understand why the Labour Party and movement had not for the most part espoused socialist ideas and policies. True, the New Left critique of Labour would not speak much to those requiring a close historical study of the Labour Party; but neither Miliband nor Anderson–Nairn had ever attempted or claimed to provide such a study. Rather, what they offered was a theoretical framework, more or less derived from Marxism, for understanding its essential nature and the particular role it played in

British capitalist development. There is undoubtedly some truth in Samuel and Stedman Jones's claim that the use of the 'analytical concentrate' *labourism* (1982: 325) can lead to over-simplification of complex historical conjunctures, and, at worst, encourage a circular and self-justificatory logic among those who apply the term. However, these methodological difficulties cannot be said to invalidate entirely the attempt to apply a theory-based interpretation.

The second strand of criticism noted above can also be countered by a close reading of the New Left's work on Labour as it developed over a number of years. Here we must look in particular at the work of Raymond Williams. For while he largely shared the view of labourism offered by his colleagues in the New Left, he, more than they, paid attention to the strengths (as well as the deficiencies) of indigenous working-class culture and socialist thought, as both separate from and contributing to the political and institutional structures of the labour movement. New Left thinkers were broadly agreed that the main ideological component of English working-class radicalism was a tradition of moral critique, having its antecedents more in utopianism (literary as well as political) and religious non-conformity than in Marxism. Whereas Anderson and Nairn were (at first) inclined to dismiss this tradition, however, Williams (along with Thompson) emphasised its value. Williams argued that the potential for this moral tradition to mature and shape the socialism of the labour movement and party had been lost, and he blamed this not only on the Fabians' imposition of a utilitarian outlook but also on the uncompromising economism of the Marxists who opposed them. Thus 'at every level, this was a direct denial of the mainstream of the moral tradition of the British working class movement, with its emphases on local democracy, participation, and the setting of human above economic standards' (1965: 24).

One of the more important and innovative of New Left thinkers, Williams did not sidestep the paradoxes thrown up for the New Left by its study of labourism, but sought to incorporate a concern with culture and humanism into his own reworking of Marxism as 'cultural materialism'. He thus added to the New Left interpretation of labourism a more nuanced and sympathetic element, taking it beyond an orthodox Marxist approach. But though his analysis went further than those of other New Leftists in acknowledging the value of indigenous radical ideas, and the genuine human sources of some Labour Left thinking, Williams nevertheless shared with other New Left writers the view that the dominant traditions and internal structural logic of labourism subordinated and defused these genuinely or potentially socialist elements. By 1967 he, too, was convinced that the Labour Party was no longer 'just an inadequate agency for socialism, it was now an active collaborator in the process of reproducing capitalist society'. He was later to characterise Labour as a 'post social democratic party' essential to British capitalism when economic and social stability demanded a neutralised working class (1979: 373, 377).

Evolution of the New Left critique

Williams's developing perspectives are representative of a broader trend in the evolution of New Left interpretations of Labour, which, though continuing to build

on the analytical framework established in the 1960s, subtly altered over time. In general it might be said that the focus shifted from an emphasis on the unique features of the British State, its constitutional, cultural and social order (the early Anderson and Nairn theses) towards an analysis that situated the critique of Labour more firmly in relation to the development of global capitalism and Britain's position within this order. The New Left approach also began to contribute to a broader set of concerns which developed on the Left around the nature of British capitalism, relative economic decline, and the need for far-reaching constitutional change. In this evolution of New Left thinking on Labour, the contribution of Tom Nairn deserves special attention since it both built upon and revised the existing Nairn–Anderson approach, while also reworking it to take account of new political developments and his own changing theoretical preoccupations.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, Nairn reworked the earlier theses, in the process shifting the emphasis towards analysis, not so much of the internal specificities of labourism, but rather of the extent to which the party, in its nature, structures and ideology, was inextricably bound up with the archaism of the British State and the decline of British capitalism: its 'sickness', first diagnosed by Miliband, increasingly viewed as only one symptom of a chronic 'British disease'. One of the fundamental arguments supporting Nairn's diagnosis of this 'British disease' concerned the relationship of the Labour Party with British imperialism and nationalism, now more fully theorised and placed in historical context than it had been in the original theses. Nairn situated the rise of Labour in relation to the heyday of English imperialism and the key tenet that this coincided with an era of exhausted quiescence in the labour movement, and argued that the party had thus from the first confronted 'an epoch of imperialist decline . . . with a philosophy and an organisation rooted in the preceding era of imperial confidence and stability' (1970: 4). He also gave extended consideration to the particular brand of nationalism espoused by the British Labour Party. Advocating entry into what was then termed the European Economic Community (EEC) against the tide of opinion on the Left, he argued that Labour's opposition to the EEC was illustrative of the depth of its commitment to nationalist illusions and of its subordination within the British State formation. It was, Nairn contended (1972: 49–50), constitutionally incapable of putting class before nation in the final test. In sum,

one may say that while Labour seems . . . to stand for class against nation, it represents in reality the ascendancy of nation and the state over class. In analogous fashion, while at a deeper level the left seems to oppose the right-wing leadership in the name of class socialism, in reality it too sustains that leadership and so, in its own particular way, the nation and the state. The whole structure of the movement represents a complex estrangement of 'class' by 'nation', a process by which a class *both* affirms its own being politically, and consistently loses that being by the very way in which that affirmation is made – via the deep-rooted national-political 'rules' secreted after a long conservative history.

In developing the theme of Britain's 1970s 'crisis', Nairn returned to the original Nairn–Anderson emphasis on an interpretation of the British situation in its

totality. Politically, for Nairn, the best hope for a way out of the impasse that was the 'British disease' was increasingly seen to be some kind of structural break or rupture within one or more of the intertwined elements of Britain's archaic constitutional order. Peripheral nationalism was for a time seen as holding out the possibility for such a 'break up of Britain' (Nairn 1977) and, later, the split in the Labour Party was also viewed in this light. The hope was that the polarisation of the party might presage a disintegration of labourism in its existing form that could enable the Left to break free of its crippling confines.

If this hope proved a vain one, Nairn's work continued to feed into a developing corpus of New Left and Marxist-inspired work which broadened out the analysis beyond labourism and towards a more general critique of British capitalism and the State. Contributing to this were – as well as central figures in the original New Left such as Miliband, Saville, Hall, Anthony Barnett, Nairn and Anderson – a number of other leftists including Andrew Gamble (1974, 1981) and Colin Leys (1983). As chapter 5, by David Coates and Leo Panitch, argues, by the 1980s certain premisses of the New Left approach had won general acceptance in much leftist scholarship. The idea of a long-run 'crisis' at the centre of British politics, having to do with the historical specificities of Britain's political and social structures, and conditioning the nature and range of political and economic options, became common currency. So, too, did the idea of the structural weakness of the UK economy as causally linked to the nature of Britain's state institutions and social structures. These were ideas that fed into more mainstream debates about the need for far-reaching constitutional change and electoral reform, and Britain's relative economic decline. Particularly through the journalism of Will Hutton (1996) they have continued to develop in the work of leftist scholars of both the Labour Party and British politics in general.

Strategic orientations

If the New Left's interpretation of labourism has proved influential in an intellectual sense, it has remained somewhat marginal in directly political terms. Despite its articulation of a consistent critique, the New Left was only intermittently involved in directly political initiatives to the Left of Labour, and the central strategic question that its analysis of Labour raised – whether socialists should work within or outside of the party – remained unresolved. The ambivalence of the early New Left towards Labour, as has been seen, undermined its mobilising aspirations and contributed to its disintegration. Though the later New Left eschewed such directly political ambition, and thus avoided a similar fate, it nevertheless remained divided on this intractable issue. Anderson and Blackburn's 1965 volume *Towards Socialism* gave extended consideration to the strategic dilemma posed by the nature and predominance of the Labour Party.

Among the contributions, Perry Anderson's 'Problems of socialist strategy' stands out as one of the most insightful interpretations of the problems and opportunities posed for socialists by Labour that any New Left writer produced, though it had much in common with work produced contemporaneously or

subsequently by other New Left writers. Developing the Milibandian critique of Labour's parliamentarism, Anderson went further to argue that in view of the 'statism' of Western social democratic parties, any viable socialist strategy must be based firmly within civil society. The task for socialists, he concluded, was the creation of a truly hegemonic party, proposing a 'coherent, global alternative to the existing social order, and represent[ing] a permanent drive towards it' (Anderson 1965b: 240). Such a party, he stated, should unite the working class and also include technical and white-collar workers, as well as radicalised intellectuals. It needed to direct its activities into cultural and societal fields, as well as the State, and thereby prefigure the new society in its own (democratic) practices.

It was abundantly clear that Labour bore little relationship to Anderson's vision of the hegemonic party; yet, because it was the only working-class party in a nation where the working class comprised 70 per cent of the population, he judged that it could not be ignored. Its position represented a 'permanent chance' for socialism lodged within the British social structure, yet the party itself was constitutionally unable to seize this opportunity. Some of the Left's traditional assumptions regarding the relationship of the Labour Party to the working class were challenged. Anderson pointed out that the supposed 'mass' character of the Labour Party was somewhat overstated: in fact, Labour had relatively few members and activists among the working class, a third of whom actually supported the Conservative Party. And Labour had no strong youth organisation and no dedicated party press. Any claim that it unified the working class was rejected – on the contrary, in its preoccupation with parliamentarism and exclusive dedication to electoralism Labour atomised its support and neglected other forms of political activity.

One of the interesting things about Anderson's essay, in retrospect, is the way it anticipated the contours of later discussion of strategic options on the British Left. His analysis in fact had much in common with that later made by Stuart Hall, whose better-known work on 'Thatcherism' also proceeded from an attempt to apply Gramsci's ideas in an enquiry into the ways and means of hegemonic dominance. Hall's early work on this theme was strikingly similar to Anderson's in its criticism of the Left's fixation with state power and its identification of civil society as the key terrain on which to situate the struggle, and there were also obvious parallels with Raymond Williams's arguments regarding the critical importance of culture and communication. Eric Hobsbawm's influential 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture 'The forward march of Labour halted?' (1981) also made some points similar to Anderson's – some thirteen years later – concerning the relationship of the working class to Labour organisations, beginning a debate which led eventually to the resignation of much of the socialist Left to the 'broad democratic alliance' programme sponsored by *Marxism Today*.

With 'Thatcherism' in full flow in the 1980s the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock, who gave a nod to Hobsbawm's analysis, embarked on a process of 'modernisation' that many characterised as the pursuit of electoral victory at any cost. The dangers of such an approach had been outlined by Anderson in 1965. Discussing the view that the task for Labour was to win over fractions of the Tory vote at each election, he warned that this could only result in a permanent pursuit of

the fickle middle-class vote in a way which would damage democracy while doing nothing to advance socialism. However, Anderson simultaneously rejected the traditional Labour Left's alternative of populist appeals to voters' altruism (Bennism, later supported by *NLR*, could be seen in this light). What was proposed instead for socialists and Labour was a *grass-roots* campaign, based in the working class, and aimed at winning 'a permanent sociological majority of the nation'. In sum, the strategy proposed must amount to a systematic effort to 'marry the structure of the socialist movement to the contours of civil society' (1965b: 279). Written at a time when it was becoming clear that Wilsonism, even if pushed to its very limits, held out little promise of embarking upon this kind of transformation, Anderson simultaneously doubted that any other force could emerge outside the Labour Party to mount a realistic challenge. Hence his admission of the 'abstract', or utopian, character of his recommendations in the immediate context: 'An authentic socialist strategy can only be born within the internal dialectic of a mass socialist movement; it has no meaning or possibility outside it' (1965b: 222).

The question of how such a mass socialist movement was to be brought into being troubled *NLR* somewhat less than it had the earlier New Left, Anderson and company having renounced any mobilising role in favour of a project of intellectual transformation. Such a stance enabled *NLR* to escape the fate which had overtaken its predecessor, one which was also to befall the regrouping of some of the early New Left as the *May Day Manifesto* initiative in the late 1960s. Raymond Williams, initially the prime mover in this, was joined by Hall and Thompson, their aim being to produce a new understanding of the changing nature of capitalism and the Labour Party within the context of a non-sectarian organisational initiative. 'Shall we', they asked in the *Manifesto*, 'from the heart of the labour movement, try to create in actuality what has long been imagined in theory, a New Left?' (Williams, Hall and Thompson 1967: 36). The *Manifesto* was launched on 1 May 1967.

Despite the group's desire to take a non-sectarian approach, it was in fact riven, up to the highest level, by serious disagreement on the central strategic question; whether or not it was permissible for socialists to make electoral interventions to the Left of the Labour Party. Though their disagreement was not made public, Williams was in favour of an extra-parliamentary strategy, while Thompson would not renounce all hope in the PLP. Consequently, no real strategic suggestions were offered during 1967–68. This was part of the reason why the *Manifesto* movement never really got off the ground as a *political* initiative; the other was that it was simply overtaken by events. By the time its proposed national 'Convention of the Left' was held, in April 1969, and the group finally committed itself to acceptance of the need for 'the formation of a political movement, radical and socialist, primarily extra-parliamentary, but accepting the significance of a national presence', the Paris May and the wave of student activism had left it behind. In some ways its fate recalled that of the 'first' New Left and 'NLR Mark I': in attempting to move beyond intellectual analysis of the situation to a directly political and mobilising role, it disintegrated. A key sticking point, as before, was a profound ambivalence about the relationship of a New Left to the Labour Party.

By contrast, *NLR*'s increasing orientation towards a revolutionary Marxist politics from the late 1960s hardened its strategic perspective. The Labour Party was increasingly presented in the pages of the journal as a positive obstacle to socialism. An interview with Michael Foot (1968: 28) gave *NLR* the opportunity to warn him that 'young militants ask themselves today whether a struggle against the Labour party as it is might not eventually be an unavoidable form that the struggle for socialism must take at a time when the Labour government is actually the executor of British capitalism'. By the time of the general election in 1970, far from considering it the duty of socialists to try to push Labour in a leftwards direction, *NLR* was able to declare (in its regular editorial introduction 'Themes') that 'its cringing record as a custodian of British capital needs no demonstration here, and poses few problems for Marxists' (*NLR* 1970: 1). Indeed, the sole reason for any continued attention to the party was simply that 'to understand Labourism in its deepest anchorage is a condition of eliminating it in struggle today'. Writing in *Red Mole* shortly before joining the Trotskyist International Marxist Group (IMG), Robin Blackburn (1970: 1) went so far as to declare that the only principled course for socialists would be 'an active campaign to discredit both of Britain's large capitalist parties'.

In 1972 *Parliamentary Socialism* was re-issued, giving Miliband the opportunity to add a postscript in which he argued for 'the dissipation of paralysing illusions about the true purpose and role of the Labour Party' (1972: 377; see also chapter 4 of this book, by Michael Newman). At various points through the 1970s *The Socialist Register* was the locus for a renewed debate on the strategic options available to socialists *vis-à-vis* the party. The nub of the problem was succinctly summed up by Ken Coates, when he said: 'If the Labour Party cannot be turned into a socialist party then the question which confronts us all is, how can we form a socialist party? If we are not ready to answer this question, then we are not ready to dismiss the party that exists' (1973: 155). While in general convinced of the first point, New Left opinion on the rest of Coates's conundrum remained divided. Miliband's exhortation to socialists to 'move on' from Labour and consider how to form 'a socialist party free from the manifold shortcomings of existing organisations' (1976: 140) revived discussion, but little practical progress was made. The terms of the debate were to be altered somewhat by electoral defeat for Labour in 1979. In the ensuing crisis, in particular with regard to the secession of many on the Labour Right to form the Social Democratic Party in 1981 and the advent of Bennism, some of the New Left were to invest renewed hopes in the Labour Left.

This turn back to Labour was motivated by a real hope that Bennism would represent a new formation within the party that would break the confines of labourism and give rise to what Quintin Hoare and Tariq Ali in 1982 called 'a new model Labour party'. The secession of the Right of the party – presaging a possible 'break-up of labourism' – added weight to this view. Some remained sceptical, however. The idea of a rupture in the party creating new opportunities for socialism was not new – indeed it was one of the 'paralysing illusions' that Miliband was keen to dispel. The New Left's own interpretation of labour in many ways gave

more grounds for pessimism than optimism about the prospects for Bennism, and the political conclusions that were drawn by some proved, predictably perhaps, to have rested on an overestimation of the possibilities.

The importance attached to 'Bennism' as a force which could break free from Labourist contradictions rested on an underestimation of the extent to which this formation was *itself* a product of those contradictions. In their attempt to displace the moderate leadership of the party the Bennites demonstrated their adherence to the traditional Labour Left belief that leadership 'betrayal' of the socialist 'soul' of the party was the major cause of its failures. Nor did Benn's programme transcend Left labourist confines in other ways. Most crucially, its goals were envisaged as achievable without major change to the Westminster model. Secondly, an implicit assumption of the Bennite project, if it was to be realised, was that not only was there a socialist majority within the labour movement itself but also within the electorate as a whole. In no sense did Bennism really address the problem of how socialist consciousness was to be *created*, both within and outside the party, rather than simply appealed to or mobilised. In immediately political terms, however, the 'socialists in or out debate' must be regarded as somewhat marginal given the scale of Labour's subsequent electoral defeat.

From New Left to New Labour

The lessons drawn by the dominant tendency within the Labour Party from the crushing defeat of 1983 placed it firmly on the course of the 'modernisation' which was eventually to lead to power, but at the cost of accepting much of the social, political, economic and ideological legacy of eighteen years of Conservative rule as unchallengeable. Writers of the New Left during this period offered influential analyses of the New Right, and as ideas of a generalised 'crisis of the Left' took hold, New Left opinion on Labour became increasingly divided between those who tolerated the Kinnockite overhaul of the party as the only way to bring an end to 'Thatcherism' and those who wanted to maintain a 'resolute Left' perspective (for example, Hall 1988; Hall and Jacques 1983). Among the latter we may include Williams, Saville, Miliband and the *NLR* group, several of whom began to view fundamental reform of the structures of the State, and in particular electoral reform, as the best immediate prospect for the Left in decidedly unpropitious circumstances. As it related to the Labour Party, this projection advocated that as much pressure as possible be brought to bear on the party to persuade it to adopt far-reaching constitutional reform measures as part of its programme.

The disinclination of New Labour in power to do more than tinker with the structures of the State has not been viewed with surprise, however, by those who retain a broadly New Left perspective. Recent contributions to the relaunched *NLR* by Nairn (2000) and Anthony Barnett (2000) have catalogued the failings and disappointments of Blair's modernisation agenda, but without being able to suggest any convincing vehicle for advance. This is illustrative of the argument made earlier, that despite having offered insightful, theoretically informed and empirically well-grounded interpretations of Labour over a number of years, New

Left thinkers have been largely unable to help the British Left more widely to overcome the *political* problem of how to transcend or permanently alter Labourism. This in turn should not be viewed as a 'failure' of the New Left. Rather, it is illustrative of the fact that the New Left since its inception has embodied (the early New Left) or in other ways been the pivotal point of (the later New Left) a representational crisis and a profound uncertainty about the purposes and direction of a socialist project. The legacy of the New Left must be viewed as in key respects an ambivalent, contradictory and problematical one. This is as true of the early New Left as of any later variants.

The arrival of the New Left was a product of a particular conjunction of events – a crisis, for many left intellectuals – which forced them to question traditionally held assumptions and beliefs about the nature of a socialist project and how such a project might be created. From the start the New Left experimented with new ideas about the changing nature of capitalism and the role of class within it. In both its early and late manifestations the New Left has represented a range of approaches to the question of agency and in particular whether sections of society other than the industrial working class might contribute to the creation of a socialist future. In their endeavours to grapple with such issues the New Left has drawn on novel theoretical influences (finding Gramsci, in particular, an inspiring source). The New Left's nature as an intellectual current obviously has dictated the special attention given to the question of the role that intellectual work and cultural transformation can play.

It is easy to caricature the concerns of the New Left (particularly the later New Left) and to fall back too easily on arguments about a retreat into the academy and an exaggerated distance from the concerns of working people. Undoubtedly the New Left does leave us with a generally difficult legacy – it was responsible for a great flowering of Marxist-influenced work in a variety of disciplines and contexts, and yet this work was completed against the political tide.

One might argue also that the New Left's renunciation or questioning of certain of the tenets and assumptions of the traditional Left contributed to a climate of uncertainty and disorientation in which the New Right, rather than the New Left, proved able to seize the initiative. Politically speaking, the New Left must be adjudged to have had only a marginal significance. But one should not conclude from this that its perspectives may be ignored. If the British New Left has proved incapable of influencing political events in anything more than a marginal way, it has nonetheless provided us with perspectives for evaluating and understanding those events which may still prove useful.

This chapter has advanced that argument in relation to one particular aspect of the New Left's work – the interpretation of Labour; and it contends that New Left writers have proved and still prove to be well placed to offer enduringly valuable perspectives on the nature of Labour that help us understand its development and prospects.

References

Unless indicated, the place of publication is London. *New Left Review* is abbreviated to *NLR*.

- Anderson, P. (1964) 'Origins of the present crisis', *NLR*, 23
- Anderson, P. (1965a) 'The Left in the 50s', *NLR*, 29
- Anderson, P. (1965b) 'Problems of socialist strategy', in Anderson, P. and Blackburn, R. (eds) *Towards Socialism*
- Anderson, P. (1987) 'The figures of descent', *NLR*, 161
- Barnett, A. (2000) 'Corporate populism and partyless democracy', *NLR*, 3
- Blackburn, R. (1970) 'Let it bleed: Labour and the general election', *Red Mole*, 15 April
- Chun, L. (1993) *The British New Left*, Edinburgh
- Coates, D. (1982) 'Space and agency in the transition to socialism', *NLR*, 135
- Coates, K. (1973) 'Socialists and the Labour Party', *The Socialist Register 1973*
- Foot, M. (1968) (Interview) 'Credo of the Labour Left', *NLR*, 49
- Gamble, A. (1974) *The Conservative Nation*
- Gamble, A. (1981) *Britain in Decline*
- Hall, S. (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*
- Hall, S. (1989) 'The first New Left: life and times', in Archer, R., Bubeck, D., Glock, H., Jacobs, L., Moglen, S., Steinhouse, A. and Weinstock, D. (eds) *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left 30 Years On*
- Hall, S. and Jacques, M. (eds) (1983) *The Politics of Thatcherism*
- Hoare, Q. and Ali, T. (1982) 'Socialists and the crisis of Labourism', *NLR*, 132
- Hobsbawm, E. (1981) 'The forward march of Labour halted?', in Mulhern, F. and Jacques, M. (eds) *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*
- Hutton, W. (1996) *The State We're In*
- Kenny, M. (1995) *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin*
- Leys, C. (1983) *Politics in Britain*
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1848) *The Communist Manifesto*
- Miliband, R. (1972 [1961]) *Parliamentary Socialism*, 2nd edition
- Miliband, R. (1976) 'Moving on', *The Socialist Register 1976*
- Nairn, T. (1964a) 'The British political elite', *NLR*, 23
- Nairn, T. (1964b) 'The English working class', *NLR*, 24
- Nairn, T. (1964c) 'The nature of the Labour Party I', *NLR*, 27
- Nairn, T. (1964d) 'The nature of the Labour Party II', *NLR*, 28
- Nairn, T. (1970) 'The fateful meridian', *NLR*, 60
- Nairn, T. (1972) 'The Left against Europe', *NLR*, 75
- Nairn, T. (1977) *The Break-Up of Britain*
- Nairn, T. (2000) 'Ukania under Blair', *NLR*, 1
- New Left Review* (1970) 'Themes', *NLR*, 60
- Rothstein, T. (1929) *From Chartism to Labourism: Historical Sketches of the English Working Class Movement*
- Samuel, R. and Stedman Jones, G. (1982) 'The Labour Party and social democracy', in Samuel, R. and Stedman Jones, G. (eds) *Culture, Ideology and Politics*
- Saville, J. (1960) 'Apathy into politics', *NLR*, 4
- Saville, J. (1967) 'Labourism and the Labour Government', *The Socialist Register 1967*
- Saville, J. (1975) 'The ideology of Labourism', in Benewick, R. Berki, R. and Parekh, B. (eds) *Knowledge and Belief in Politics*
- Sedgwick, P. (1976) 'The two New Lefts', in Widgery, D. (ed.) *The Left in Britain 1956–68*, Harmondsworth

- Thompson, E. P. (1960) 'Revolution', *NLR*, 3
- Thompson, E. P. (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*
- Thompson, E. P. (1965) 'The peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register 1965*
- Williams, R. (1965) 'The British Left', *NLR*, 30
- Williams, R. (1979) *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*
- Williams, R., Hall, S. and Thompson, E. P. (eds) (1967) *The May Day Manifesto*