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An exceptional comrade? The Nairn–Anderson interpretation

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Since the early 1960s, in a series of articles and books, Tom Nairn has articulated a distinct and challenging interpretation of Labour Party politics. Many of these publications formed part of a wider project, one closely associated with the work of Perry Anderson which examined the trajectory of British political development over the last 300 years.

While there was much overlap with Anderson's concerns, Nairn's central – and initial – contribution to this undertaking focused on a particular account of the character of British reformism. Two of Nairn's publications stand out as especially relevant in this regard. First, in 'The nature of the Labour Party', a paper in two parts originally published in *New Left Review* during 1964 and subsequently merged as a chapter of Anderson and Blackburn's *Towards Socialism* (1965), he gave a coruscating overview of the party's failures during the first sixty years of its history. In passing, the reader should note that although these publications are cited by their original titles as papers, where applicable, they are quoted from the volumes in which Nairn and Anderson later republished them. Second, in *The Left Against Europe* (Nairn 1973), a short book originally published as a special issue of *New Left Review*, Nairn assessed what he considered to be the British Left's inadequate response to the Conservative Government's application for membership of the Common Market.

Aspects of Nairn's critique of the Labour Party are not original, echoing those associated with other condemnations of 'Labourism'. Taken together, however, his work has provided a distinctive explanation of the difficulties encountered by the party, the failures it has generated and the many disappointments it has induced. His analysis is, moreover, unusual in the emphasis it placed on the need to examine Labour's record within the context of European social democracy. Interestingly, many of Nairn's points echoed those made by Egon Wertheimer, a German social democrat and journalist, one of the first to compare Labour to its continental counterparts. Wertheimer's 1930 *Portrait of the Labour Party* was, however, a largely descriptive and fairly positive account, whereas Nairn's analysis of Labour politics is a blunt and often scornful evaluation of its weaknesses.

Nairn's emphasis on the exceptional character of British reformism provides the basis for a discussion of a feature of Labour's politics that has been often overlooked by academics: the party's insularity. To be sure, commentators have noted the party's isolation – in terms of ideological contacts and organisational communications – from other parties of the Left. Rarely, however, have they assigned causal significance to that remoteness in defining Labour's character. It is worth noting that at the time Nairn's 'The nature of the Labour Party' was published, some commentators and scholars concluded that Labour was finally starting to look towards European social democracy for inspiration. A frequent claim made during the early 1960s (and since, for that matter) was that Labour's right-wing revisionist leadership wanted to mimic the outlook adopted by continental reformist parties. Before fully setting down his thought on the subject, even Anderson thought that the party's right-wing intellectuals, in particular Anthony Crosland, saw Sweden as 'an exemplary model of an existing socialist society, and one from which we have much to learn' (Anderson 1961a: 4; see also Anderson 1961b as well as Elliott 1993: x and 1998: 2–3).

While this chapter examines mainly Nairn's interpretation of Labour politics, Anderson's work is referred to when relevant. It focuses on a distinct aspect of their joint endeavour, the contrast between British social democrats and their European counterparts. It does not, however, address the wider context within which Nairn located his account – the 'Nairn–Anderson theses' which, in the latter's words, drew up 'a general map of English class society' and constructed a 'framework for understanding the national crisis of British capitalism' (1992d: 2). That is something more completely covered in chapter 3, by Madeleine Davis.

I first outline the central features of Nairn's argument, leaning heavily on his original two-part article and assessing where it fits with the work not only of his collaborator Anderson but that of other leading figures on the New Left, especially Ralph Miliband. As one way of examining the veracity of Nairn's substantive points, Wertheimer's earlier and friendlier analysis is also cited. The chapter then addresses the extent to which Nairn's approach can be reconciled with the often-made claim that Labour sought to learn from Swedish social democrats during the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, the strands of the chapter are drawn together in assessing what Nairn's work contributes to our understanding of the party.

An anatomy of 'Labourism'

For the purposes of this chapter, there are three inter-related parts to Nairn's explanation of Labour's supposed bankruptcy as a reformist party. First, he considers that the party exhibited a 'well known antipathy to theory' (Nairn 1965: 159); second, that Labour was dominated by its trade union affiliates; and, third, that the party persistently demonstrated a defensive and subordinate outlook. Together these determined the character of British reformism, which Nairn describes as 'Labourism', a term first articulated in debates at the start of the twentieth century (for a general discussion see Fielding 2000). In the early 1960s, members of the

New Left, including most notably Ralph Miliband, redeployed the term. While there were differences in the meaning Miliband and Nairn respectively attached to the concept, aspects of the former's account nonetheless resonate with the latter's analysis.

The first element that makes up Nairn's appreciation of Labour's failure to develop into a fully fledged reformist party was its atheoretical and empirical stance. This meant it did not draw on Marxist or, for that matter, any other ideas; it assigned intellectuals no substantive internal role; and it was unable to outline a coherent theoretical design of what might be involved in a socialist transition (Nairn 1965: 165–6; see also Chun 1993: 80). Labour's 'empirical and flexible' outlook was also a central feature of Miliband's seminal text *Parliamentary Socialism* (1972: 1). Wertheimer (1930: 46, 195 and 202) similarly contended, and with considerable emphasis, that there was a 'mistrust of theory and systematic thought' within the wider labour movement. In *The Future of Socialism* Crosland, in 1956 out of the House of Commons, developed a related premiss: Labour 'was not founded on any body of doctrine at all, and has always preserved a marked anti-doctrinal and anti-theoretical bias' (1956: 80).

Hence Anderson could lament 'the failure of any significant body of intellectuals to join the cause of the proletariat until the very end of the nineteenth century' (1992a: 34). Yet, even that inflow was characterised as comprising pseudo-intellectuals and essentially bogus socialists, whose most important constituent was Fabianism, which was committed to merely piecemeal and practical reforms enacted through the parliamentary system. Anderson defines it to be a 'leaden legacy' (1992a: 35); while for Nairn (1965: 167) the Fabians were, if nothing else, 'the technicians of reform – perhaps the most able reformers of this kind produced by socialism in any country'. Moreover, from Labour's first days, overtly socialist groups were marginalised, while other left-wing elements, most obviously the ILP, were as weak as the Fabians in taking up and deploying ideas. Lacking coherence, the ILP was characterised by a strong moral outlook, one inspired by Christianity (Nairn 1973: 56). These groups 'accepted – the Fabians by conviction, the ILP socialists for want of an alternative – the *evolutionary* character of socialism' (Nairn 1965: 166; his emphasis). The failure of the party to offer intellectuals a meaningful part in its strategy had significant consequences, resulting in 'the lack of the catalyst element a socialist movement requires to be itself' (Nairn 1965: 174; see Anderson 1992a: 35). Wertheimer was less contemptuous of Labour's emphasis on practical measures at the expense of theoretical commitment. He even considered the party's vagueness about ultimate goals to have helped in recruiting the unions (1930: 49), while its consequently 'elastic methods' ensured that it became – at the time of writing – 'the most powerful among the Labour parties of the world' (1930: 204).

The second element to Nairn's overall analysis is the fact that in organisational terms, from the party's foundation, Labour was dominated by the trade unions. This meant, as Anderson notes, that at its origins 'there was to be no mention of socialism' (Anderson 1992b: 160). It also meant that when, in 1918, the party adopted a new constitution, including an ideological position, Clause 4, which

apparently defined Labour's commitment to public ownership, it had little practical force. Despite appearances, Nairn (1965: 184) argues, this did not signify a conversion to socialism; it rather assigned the latter 'to its proper place, the constitution, where it could be admired occasionally and referred to in moments of emotion'.

Of more practical significance than Clause 4 was the party's structure, outlined in the 1918 constitution (and not substantively revised until 1997), which ensured continued union ascendancy. Most obviously, union block votes cast at its annual conference, for Nairn (using an often repeated phrase) 'the dead souls of labourism', elected most of the seats on the ruling National Executive Committee and determined the fate of proposals submitted to conference (Nairn 1965: 180). This is because, for most of the party's history, block votes constituting the affiliated members of trade unions massively outweighed the party's individual membership. In similar vein, Wertheimer likened some of the block vote to 'dead souls', those whose levies were paid by union officials despite their memberships having lapsed (1930: 23). Writing years later, Anderson also took up the metaphor: 'Over time, it [the block vote] raised up a Leviathan of dead souls, whose mythical millions enabled party leaderships to crush rebellions and to finance elections' (1992c: 349). It was these unions that constituted 'the real basis of labourism' (Nairn 1965: 208).

The union ascendancy made the development of a mass party much harder than it would otherwise have been, as apolitical affiliated members undermined the financial and electoral need to expand Labour's active base. 'The lack of any intensive local party life and the slender threads that bound trade unionists to the party', Wertheimer stated (1930: 22), 'tended to work against the formation of a strong individual socialist consciousness.' Sharing a commitment to piecemeal measures, the Fabians and the trade unions formed an enduring alliance (Nairn 1965: 180–1). Compelled by a deep-seated loyalty and acutely aware of its own weaknesses, the party's Left was however unable to challenge this bond. At times the link between the unions and the PLP nonetheless endured what appeared to be an unbearable tension. Wertheimer puzzled over its persistence in the face of manifest incompatibilities over policy, in what Lewis Minkin (1991) characterised as 'Wertheimer's paradox'. Nevertheless it is an attachment that has been sustained in one form or another to the present day.

The third part to Nairn's analysis is the apparently defensive nature of Labour's outlook. From its earliest days, the overriding concern of the unions was not socialism but the protection of workers' living standards. They decided to establish and foster their own political party in response to several factors, including: the economic crises of the late nineteenth century; frustration over lack of support from the Liberals; and legal judgments against them. In fact, Nairn concludes (1965: 162), 'trade union leaders were only convinced of the necessity for working class politics when such action became necessary to safeguard trade-unionism itself'.

The party's defensive orientation led to a concern with parliamentarianism and – in order to win votes – 'respectability': this alignment explains Labour's support

for and belief in the ‘nation’. Paradoxically therefore Labour became both a party of class (the working class) and a party of the nation and ‘Labourism is really the history of this ambiguity’ (Nairn 1973: 49). Wertheimer noted that Labour’s transformation from pressure group to governing party was comparatively relatively easy (Wertheimer 1930: 46; see also 75–7). This is because, unlike other continental parties, it had never been illegal; did not see the state as repressive; and had no record of opposition to existing political arrangements. Thus the labour movement quickly became ‘an integral part of the British nation’. Reflecting its unique status, from promoting gains by the working class, Labour frequently served to defuse pressure for more far-reaching reforms to promote national unity. Hence the measures brought about by the 1945–51 Labour Government were meant not to bring victory to the proletariat but ‘to integrate the working class more adequately into national life’ (Nairn 1973: 71). The effect of Labour’s hostility to the European Common Market after 1970 served likewise to calm more radical demands as it switched attention away from the class conflict that threatened to engulf Heath’s Conservative administration (Nairn 1973: 80–3).

As already noted, Nairn’s denunciation of Labour’s defensive outlook echoed that of Miliband. The latter also argued Labour played an integrative role in capitalist society similar to the subordination highlighted by Nairn (Miliband 1958: 46). Later, in his postscript to *Parliamentary Socialism*, Miliband argued (1972: 376) that capitalism ‘badly needs’ Labour ‘since it plays a major role in the management of discontent and helps to keep it within safe bounds’. In his study of incomes policy, Leo Panitch (1976) also took up the integrative role of the Labour Party in a sustained and persuasive analysis. David Coates and Leo Panitch further develop some of these themes in chapter 5 of the present volume. In a detailed analysis of Anderson’s account, Robert Looker (1988: 17) notes the similarities of his approach to that of many other critics of Labourism, concluding it to be distinguished from them only by its essentially ‘relentlessly dismissive’ tone.

Nairn (1965: 179, 208) saw these three features, taken together, as creating a party characterised by ‘subordination and defeat’ as well as by a ‘sclerotic conservatism’. Anderson similarly emphasised the corporately defensive nature of Labour’s configuration: the party, he believed, made no sustained attempt to be a hegemonic transforming force in British politics (Anderson 1992a: 33). In the early 1960s several features of Labour’s subordination stood out: one-third of working-class voters supported the Conservatives; the party lacked activists (in fact more workers were members of the Conservative Party); it had a weak youth movement; and did not have the support of a partisan press (Anderson 1965: 251–5).

Both Nairn and Anderson allude somewhat elliptically to the form which a successful reformist party might have taken in the context of British politics. Given that their original argument was much influenced by Gramscian analysis (see Forgas 1989: 74–6), it is unsurprising that one significant feature of such a party would be its hegemonic aspirations: for ‘a hegemonic class seeks to transform society in its own image, inventing afresh its economic system, its political institutions, its cultural values, its “mode of insertion” into the world’ (Anderson 1992a: 33). The implication of their argument is that such a party required a coherent theo-

retical understanding of a socialist transformation (Chun 1993: 80). Thus, 'armed with a more systematic vision, [Labour] would no doubt still have been defeated, but its struggles would have entered an enduring tradition, capable of informing the future' (Anderson 1992a: 33). For a brief period, in the early 1960s, *New Left Review's* position, under Anderson's editorship, indicated a hope that Harold Wilson's leadership of the party might just transform it into such a hegemonic party. Anderson believed that Labour had some potential, provided it was prepared 'to transform the structure of British society' (*The Times*, 7 June 1965). It was a position *New Left Review* soon abandoned (for a sympathetic account see Elliott, 1998: 18–32; for critical comment see Birchall 1980–81 and Sassoon 1981).

The exceptional nature of British reformism

The notion of British exceptionalism is central to the Nairn–Anderson theses. They maintain that exceptionalism permeated class forms and relations in Britain (notably the form taken by the dominant land-owning class), the character of capitalist development, and the proletariat's defensive and subordinate ethos that shaped labourism. Repeatedly Nairn emphasised the different historical path taken by reformists in the United Kingdom, a trajectory that led directly to the exceptional form of labourism as a peculiarly British phenomenon. Although lacking Nairn's historical perspective, Wertheimer's discussion of Labour politics also accords a fundamental significance to exceptionalism. His central contrast was with the German Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) but he also drew more general parallels between Britain and Europe. The opening sentence of his book is blunt: 'The foreign socialist undertaking a study of the British Labour party is met by the surprising fact that its organisation completely departs in every way from all that he has hitherto thought desirable and necessary' (Wertheimer 1930: 1).

In particular, Nairn (1973: 71), in the first place, regards continental reformists as much more open to ideas in the construction of a socialist programme, asserting: 'Above all, [British Labour] has much less in common than appears with the traditions of Marxist internationalism which constitute the most precious inheritance of the European working class.' Wertheimer (1930: 45) similarly notes the differing status given to theoretical programmes: 'In contrast to the continental parties, whose every stage of development was accompanied by a corresponding programme, the British Labour party from its hour of birth to the last years of the war had been quite content with the annual resolutions of the party conference.' Of Labour's 1918 programme, he thought that as 'an example of theoretical insight and knowledge' it was 'far inferior to the most elementary of continental socialist programmes' (1930: 60). In a discussion recorded with a trade union official during his trip to study Swedish social democracy, Anderson (1961b: 41) reports: 'We in Britain are more empirical – we don't have this ideological approach you continentals have.'

Second, Nairn believes the unions have not dominated European social democratic parties in the way they have governed Labour (1965: 168). Anderson

(1992b: 161) contrasts Labour's structure with those found on the continent: 'Its new [1918] constitution formally ratified the absolute dominance of the unions inside the party with a voting structure unlike that of any European social democracy, which effectively neutralized the admission of individual members'. For Wertheimer, the relationship between Labour and the union was 'utterly different' from that on the continent (1930: 49).

Third, Nairn contends that Labour's European equivalents were less defensive and subordinate in their outlook. Although many looked towards parliamentary tactics, they did not demonstrate the kind of utter devotion to this path characteristic of Labour. This accords with Miliband's view: 'Parliamentarism in the British Labour movement was only unique in that it was so much more explicit, confident and uninhibited than its continental counterparts, and that it met with so much less resistance' (1972: 1–2). In distinguishing Labour's attitude from that of European parties, Anderson is scathing:

In Britain, the working class has developed over one hundred and fifty years an adamant social consciousness, but never a commensurate political will. The very name of its traditional political party underlines this truth. Alone of major European working class formations, it is neither a Social Democratic nor a Socialist nor a Communist Party; it is the Labour Party – a name which designates not an ideal society, as do the others, but an existent interest. (1992a: 37; see also Fanti 1964: 31–2)

Despite a large working-class base and heavy industrialisation, political labour was slow to organise in Britain, in marked contrast with most of Europe (Anderson 1992b: 159). Anderson judges that, 'In consciousness and combativity, the English working class has been overtaken by almost all its continental opposites' (1992a: 26). He has repeated the point: 'The political subordination of the British Labour stood out in any comparative perspective' including, for that matter, the United States (Anderson 1992b: 161). Likewise Wertheimer (1930: 212) noted: 'Membership [as a union affiliate] is therefore most frequently only an attribute of loyalty to the union, and by no means the result of personal inner conviction as on the continent'.

Wertheimer (1930: 87–8) reported additional significant differences between Labour and its European counterparts. For he judges Labour's ultimate policy aims were focused on public ownership while continental parties wanted to transform the nature of work. European parties also adopted cultural aims, for example regarding the relationship between Church and State. Labour in contrast was judged to be more embedded in the prevailing dominant culture than its Left–reformist counterparts were within their own polities (1930: 89–93). He also remarked on the related ease with which Labour's parliamentary leadership controlled the party, for this was a product of the structure of union affiliations which contrasted with the continental experience of party machine domination (1930: 216).

Labour's 1945 general election victory meant that, for a fleeting moment at least, '[t]he national "British way" appeared vindicated' (Nairn 1973: 72). In the event, though full employment was temporarily achieved, the basic configuration of

capitalism was not challenged and the City of London, Britain's financial sector, recovered its dominant position within the economy (Anderson 1992b: 166). After 1948, the Fabian notion of inevitable progress according to which reform led to further reform was discredited as the Labour Government struggled to sustain the pace it had established during its first years in office: 'in reality, the Labour party's loss of confidence was the dominating fact' (Nairn 1965: 195). The relative prosperity that followed this reassertion of capitalist power also disoriented Labour: 'For about ten years after the defeat of 1951, Labourism seemed to drift at the mercy of events, feebly trying to discover a new formula' (Nairn 1965: 199).

Labour's singularity is therefore central to the explanation that Nairn and Anderson offer of its ultimate failure. In his re-evaluation of their work, Anderson (1992b: 190) summarises the correlates that defined British reformism, 'a pervasive and deep-rooted union implantation' with 'a traditional lack of central authority and obdurate resistance to rationalization of the factors of production'. He asserts that this combination precluded the construction of 'a Swedish or Austrian path in the post-war UK'. From this claim, it can be inferred that Anderson considers – in a way similar to later analysts – that union structures have ruled out the construction of corporatist-type arrangements in which short-term costs might be traded for longer term gains (for a discussion of which see Garrett 1998). Interestingly, at the time of his support for Wilson's Labour, Anderson had indicated (1964: 25) tentative support for incomes policies as a path by which socialist objectives might be advanced.

Anderson and Nairn's stress on the exceptional character of British political development as an explanation of the many disappointments undergone by the labour movement has attracted considerable academic attention. In his polemical response, E. P. Thompson (1965: 312) was bitterly critical of their notion that other countries did things 'in every respect better'. Thompson (1965: 337–9) criticised the lack of empirical detail in Nairn's account, a deficiency which he thought led the latter, on the one hand, to exaggerate the role played by Fabianism and, on the other, to neglect the contribution made by the more radical socialists. More friendly critics like Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (1982: 325) charged Nairn and Anderson with using particular episodes to construct a misleading 'ideal-type' of labourism which they then used as a framework through which to view the party's history. In response to Thompson, Anderson conceded that his original analysis was overly cultural and neglected the contribution of the Communist Party to the labour movement (1992b: 168; 1966: 24). Nonetheless, George Lichtheim praised both Thompson and Anderson–Nairn with equanimity. Noting the emergence of an 'Anglo-Marxism', he concluded that 'Thompson is right: the British development fits the Marxian categories as much as does the French' while stating that Anderson and Nairn's 'brilliant' and 'fruitful' conceptual approach 'looks like a remarkably successful naturalisation of Gramsci's neo-Marxism' (Lichtheim 1965: 14–15).

Labour and Sweden in the 1950s

In their analysis, Nairn and Anderson say less about the insular outlook of British reformism than about its exceptional nature. Implicit in their approach, however, is the conviction that not only does Labour differ by comparison with other social democratic parties but that it is *isolated* from them, with detrimental consequences for the reformist project in the UK. Thus, in his discussion of Swedish social democracy, Anderson contended that the British Left ‘has usually tended to be insular’ and had ‘much to learn from Sweden and other countries’ (1961a: 4–5). With regard to ideas, Nairn (1965: 164) argued: ‘The leaders of labourism thought that, however appropriate Marxism might be in foreign countries, it just had no reference to Britain.’ He went on to quote G. D. H. Cole’s reference to Ben Tillet, a union militant, who declared in 1893 that ‘he would sooner have the solid, progressive, matter-of-fact fighting trade unionism of England than all the hare-brained challenges and magpies of continental revolutionists’ (Nairn 1965: 171). A general belief in insularity also figures prominently in Wertheimer’s account. He observed (1930: 53) that when, in 1918, Labour did finally adopt a policy document – *Labour and the New Social Order* – which outlined a set of aims, it had little impact abroad, which Wertheimer took to be a reflection of the party’s isolation from other reformists.

A significant criticism of the notion that Labour has been from the outset an insular exceptionalist–reformist party, however, is to be found in the argument that, during the 1950s and early 1960s, some of its senior figures – namely revisionists on the party’s Right – looked towards their European neighbours in a systematic and determined fashion. This need not, however, be seen as contradicting Nairn and Anderson’s case, as it may simply mean that the likes of Gaitskell and Crosland reached similar conclusions at about the same time and decided to tackle the party’s historical isolation. Notes from a talk given by Crosland certainly demonstrate some sympathy for the Nairn–Anderson interpretation including such headings as ‘Britain: what’s wrong’ or ‘Continuous under-estimate of Eur. Mov.’, ‘Nostalgia for Little England’, and ‘No foreign invasion or defeat’. Crosland appeared to echo Anderson’s historical analysis in writing: ‘Class structure not abolished: aristocracy peacefully embraced new classes’ (Crosland nd). Anderson’s pieces on Swedish politics were in fact based on his belief that Labour was beginning to open itself up by looking at social democratic achievements elsewhere – although he soon abandoned that position. Nairn (1964: 65) does not appear to have ever adopted such a view, for he characterised revisionism as a recasting of Fabianism and saw Gaitskell as the ‘chosen vehicle’ for the ‘continuation of the alliance between Fabian intellectualism and trade union bureaucracy’. His scepticism on this point is confirmed by a later comment that, the revisionists constituted a generation of ‘liberal thinkers’ who ‘invented “social democratic” forces for the Labour party, based upon *largely spurious parallels* with continental socialist reformism’ (Nairn 1981: 51; my emphasis).

In contrast to this, a number of academics have asserted that Labour’s revisionists did look towards Swedish social democracy with genuine interest. David

Howell (1980: 193) argued that, in the 1950s, the revisionists ‘proclaimed Sweden as a worthy example for British Labour to emulate, regarding it as a society where social democracy had adapted itself successfully to material affluence in such a way as to appear the natural governing party’. Howell (1980: 201) claimed vindication in positions found in Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* (1956) and especially in his 1963 *The Conservative Enemy*. Further support is offered by Stefan Berger’s claim (2000: 322) that Crosland ‘like many in the Labour Party remained in touch with mainland European reformism, in particular in the Scandinavian countries’.

Just how significant an influence was Swedish social democracy on Crosland is debatable. The question is, however, important as Crosland enjoys considerable status as perhaps the pre-eminent post-war social democratic theorist. Moreover, while he opened *The Future of Socialism* with the statement ‘This book is about socialism in Britain’, he continued parenthetically that it ‘draws freely on the experiences of other countries, notably Sweden and the United States’ (1956: 12). Anderson (1961a: 4) considered Crosland to draw heavily on the former’s experience and, while he noted that the latter received an equal number of mentions, ‘of the two [Crosland] gives the palm to Sweden as coming nearest to “the socialist’s ideal of the ‘good’ society”’. In fact, the Index to the book lists over 80 references to the United States but only around 30 to Sweden, a pattern repeated in *The Conservative Enemy* where there are 13 references to Sweden and a further 4 to Scandinavia, but nearly 40 to the United States. Moreover, in both volumes, Crosland’s references to Sweden focus descriptively on particular aspects of its political economy and society: few make normative points about Swedish social democracy and what it might imply for Labour’s programme.

At points Crosland is in fact keen to distance himself from the Scandinavian model, suggesting in particular that joint enterprise councils and incomes policies should not be applied in Britain because they were inappropriate to the national context (1956: 342, 458). Hence, although impressed by the Swedish social democrats’ electoral success, Crosland believed the programme that underpinned it held little relevance to Britain. Hence the absence of a detailed critical engagement with Swedish politics is unsurprising because central aspects of the Swedish model were far removed from the one that Crosland lays out. In his discussion of wages, for example, Crosland (1956: 451) cites the 1953 translation of a Swedish trades union confederation – the *Landorganisationen* (LO) – report. This document laid out in detail what was to become the Rehn–Meidner model, which functioned in the period of full employment to facilitate labour mobility and wage restraint while promoting a measure of egalitarianism in the determination of wages. Although Crosland described this as containing an ‘excellent discussion’ of wages policy, he disagreed with its substantive argument. High profits, Crosland argued, would inevitably undermine wage restraint, which in such circumstances would have to be abandoned. The LO’s position, in contrast, was to tackle rising profits accruing to employers during a period of full employment through a fiscal squeeze while maintaining some form of wage restraint. Perhaps indicative of Crosland’s work’s insularity, Sassoon (1996: 244) considers that, while deemed to be of so much influence in Britain, *The Future of Socialism* had very little impact elsewhere in Europe.

If Crosland was not interested in looking closely at the Swedish experience, neither were other members of the British labour movement (see Wickham-Jones 2001). Between 1951 and 1964 only one Labour Party delegation and one Trades Union Congress (TUC) group visited Sweden to investigate how their counterparts went about matters. The 1951 Labour Party visit was of little consequence and accorded only the briefest of references in the party's annual report. The TUC visit in October 1962 was of more moment as it was interested in discovering the basis for union centralisation, the reasons for Sweden's calmer industrial relations and how the national interest could be reconciled to that of individual unions. It concluded, however, that '[c]lear and precise answers were not obtained to each of these questions' (TUC 1962: 1). Members of the TUC Economics Committee were also quick to argue that 'great care' should be taken in drawing conclusions about the extent to which aspects of the Swedish system were applicable in Britain: it was always unwise, and could be dangerous, to assume that what worked satisfactorily in one country could be imitated in another' (TUC Economics Committee 1963: 24).

The most common reasons given at that time by British social democrats and trade unionists as to why the Swedish approach was inappropriate concerned structural differences between the two polities. Given Labour's advocacy of an incomes policy, and the support offered for a time by the TUC to the party on this matter, however, the structural argument is not persuasive. Other critics of the Swedish model focused on its goals to conclude that the British movement should not adopt such policies because they were undesirable. This is because the Swedish road included collaboration between organised labour and employers, something which many British union leaders feared would erode their independence and ability to advance their members' interests. The TUC's 1962 trip was nonetheless a serious initiative in looking at social democratic arrangements, but little came of it. When corporatist-style policies were adopted in the UK in the mid-1960s, they were very different (and much less successful) than those adopted in Sweden.

Further evidence of Labour's insularity is to be found in its economic policy-making process of this time. Few policy documents looked at the experience of social democratic parties abroad. In the case of Sweden, only one internal document, a report of a Socialist International experts' conference, held in 1955, discussed features of its model. And this did not feed into the party's policy-making machinery. Although on some issues the party did look at arrangements abroad, for example concerning planning, when Labour returned to the question of incomes policy in the early 1960s it did not address either the Swedish experience or those of social democratic parties elsewhere. The overall impression is therefore of an insular and internalised policy-making process (Wickham-Jones 2001).

Two significant points emerge from this discussion of Labour's supposed attempt to learn from the Swedish experience. First, the claim that Labour looked towards Sweden is exaggerated. Second, Nairn's argument about the defensive and subordinate outlook of British trade unionism is only partly confirmed. In some ways, the TUC was more open than was the party, although the reasons why it eventually rejected the Swedish model are redolent of the labourism that Nairn claimed was so influential in shaping Labour politics.

Conclusions

This chapter has outlined Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson's account of Labour Party politics. It has proved to be immensely influential over the last forty years. Their polemical dismissal of the party has become an important part of the discourse by which Labour's failings as a reformist project are frequently and critically evaluated. To give just one example, in his best-selling *The State We're In*, Will Hutton (1995: 46–8) laments the 'poverty' of Labour's strategic thinking and the domination of the party by economistic unions, the party's constitution being 'disfigured' by block votes.

Nairn and Anderson emphasise the force of historical development: how much their characterisation of British reformism depends upon this particular trajectory is, however, uncertain. One can accept their conclusions about Labour's atheoretical outlook, subordination to the trade unions and defensive outlook without endorsing their analysis of British history. Nairn and Anderson nonetheless make a series of powerful points about the possible origins of Labour's failure to more fully transform capitalism.

It is arguable that some of their reasoning is exaggerated due to the polemical idiom in which they were expressed. At times the party may not have been as hostile to theoretical influence as Nairn suggests: the work of G. D. H. Cole, Evan Durbin and R. H. Tawney is pertinent here, as is Crosland's own contribution (for a useful survey on these issues see Thompson 1996). A lack of regard for Marxism did not necessarily mean the party was uninterested in ideas. There have also been constraints on the unions' domination of the party: the leadership has been able to extract resources and money as well as acquiescence over certain policy issues in exchange for meeting union demands. At times these exchanges, a central theme of the work of Lewis Minkin, which is highlighted by Eric Shaw in chapter 11 of this collection, have been far less one-sided than Nairn indicates. Indeed, from Nairn's standpoint, Wertheimer's paradox – the policy disparity between economically-minded union leaders and politically driven parliamentarians – is inexplicable. As a series of exchanges, both rational and norm-driven, the relationship makes more sense. Finally, Labour has not always been as defensive and subordinate in outlook as Nairn claims: radical programmes have been designed that go beyond the kind of practical reformism associated with Fabianism. In practice, however, the impact of such programmes has often been disappointing while the party's experience in office has often been, to say the least, disappointing.

The notion of exceptionalism is a powerful one. From its foundation in 1900, there were significant differences of outlook, policy, organisation and ethos between Labour and other European reformist parties. In a recent work, Fielding (2000) argues persuasively that the distinctions between Labour and some mythical norm of what constituted European social democracy have been exaggerated. Yet, while defining any 'European model' is problematical, it is evident that many continental social democratic parties have shared a range of features, especially in terms of their programmes. The German Wertheimer certainly believed they enjoyed a common identity, discourse and programme, and that Labour did not.

Take the contrast between Labour and the Swedish social democrats in the 1950s: they had different organisational structures (including distinct relationships between the party and the unions) and varied policy commitments which in turn reflected diverse conceptions as to what should be the goal of social democratic parties. There was a clear hostility in the United Kingdom, noted above, towards a mimicking of Swedish arrangements. Other European parties looked towards each other and learned from each other; in contrast, Labour did not. When Swedish labour economists sought to discuss their programme with the TUC their advances were rebuffed (Wickham-Jones 2001).

Labour's exceptionalism, in turn, has been related to its insularity. The concept of insularity exposed by Anderson and Nairn is an important one: it provides an explanation, in part at any rate, for the particular character of British reformism and for the kinds of policies that the party has articulated. For much of its history Labour has been reluctant to discuss, let alone learn from, experiences elsewhere. The disparities between Labour and Europe were well illustrated in the debate over British membership of the Common Market. In 1971, the left-wing MP Eric Heffer told the special Labour Party Conference that debated British membership of the Common Market: 'We must have confidence in our ability to build a socialist Britain, and not to look for some panacea outside' (Labour Party 1971: 339). A decade later, in 1981, Tony Benn complained about a draft policy paper because it was 'a real bureaucrats' paper – let's copy France and Japan. There was nothing about social justice or socialism' (Benn 1992: 150). These statements are redolent of a prevalent insularity that has defined much of the Labour Party's history – one evident on both the party's Right and its Left.

Whether the party remains as insular as it once was is another matter. During the 1980s, partly in response to a general Europeanisation of British politics, Labour looked overtly to the European social democrats, although Anderson doubted the extent of this development (see 1992c: 328). During the 1990s, the party under Tony Blair's leadership became more eclectic, looking to the experience of the Democrats in the United States but also the Australian Labour Party (see King and Wickham-Jones 1999). Arguably, however, these developments came too late to revive the reformist project within the UK. Indeed, by the 1990s, it could be argued, Labour's leaders looked abroad to find ways of finally killing off the hope that the party would ever be the means by which capitalism would be radically transformed.

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