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Ross McKibbin: class cultures, the trade unions and the Labour Party

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The work of the historian is always a complex and heterogeneous aggregate of theories, narrative, interpretation and analysis. Such originality as it possesses lies more often than not in the distinctive pattern which the historian gives to the components of his or her work, rather than the components themselves, many of which may be found elsewhere. The three books by Ross McKibbin which form the focus of this chapter raise interesting questions for the study of the Labour Party largely because of this type of originality in which familiar elements are given novel interpretation and arrangement. These studies are linked but they do not represent a systematic investigation of my subject matter; there are too many discontinuities for that in McKibbin's lines of enquiry: questions raised in relation to the years 1880–1914, for example, are simply dropped for the period 1918–50. Nevertheless a more or less coherent picture emerges of Labour's history in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is an account of the Labour Party that is intimately related to the social history of the working class. The main explanation of Labour's politics, achievements and limitations which emerges from McKibbin's work is grounded in the culture of its principal constituency – the British working class – rather than the party's leadership, organisation and programme. Though the first of his studies – *The Evolution of the Labour Party* (1974) – is an institutional history of the party, McKibbin was already persuaded that political action is the result of social and cultural attitudes which are not primarily political. Politics itself is said to play only a subordinate and inarticulate part in people's lives. The general thesis of this book – an implicit theory of British society – attributes both the rise of the Labour Party in the years up to 1924 and the slow attrition on the part of the Liberal Party to the growth of 'an acutely developed working class consciousness'. But it is a class consciousness which obstructed the spread of socialism and excluded Labour from many areas of working-class life. Though the Labour Party remained ideologically vague until at least the end of its third decade, according to McKibbin, it was unable to become the sort of catch-all 'people's party' which some of its leaders desired. It remained a class party.

The growth of 'an acutely developed working class consciousness' thus involves a paradox: Labour's rise both depended on and was restricted by it. *The Ideologies of Class* (1990) promises to make this paradoxical thesis more explicit by pursuing answers to the question: 'What was the social character of the British working class in the period we conventionally think it to be most mature, that is from the 1880s to the early 1950s?' At this point the range of the investigation is broadened. McKibbin now wants to examine the relations of the working class to the rest of society as well as its relations to the Labour Party. *Classes and Cultures* (1998) takes this a stage further, and though the Labour Party itself virtually disappears in the process McKibbin tells us that his biggest study to date is 'a political book . . . probably more a book about the social and ideological foundations of English politics than anything else'.

I begin by considering McKibbin's account of the working class in the period of Labour's birth, broadly the years 1880–1914, a time when Britain had proportionately the largest working class in the world. The working class represented about 75 per cent of the population and was largely free of the ethnic, linguistic, national and sectarian divisions which obstructed class solidarity elsewhere. Class divisions were both conspicuous and acute. Class segregation, according to McKibbin, even intensified in the years between 1918 and 1951, as the classes became more isolated, occupationally and residentially, each from the others. The future that had been predicted in the 1880s was that of a social explosion resulting from class conflict. But it was a future that failed to materialise. Britain alone of the major European states produced no mass Marxist party in the years up to 1914. While Werner Sombart famously puzzled over the question 'Why is there no socialism in the United States?' McKibbin considered that the question of 'exceptionalism' might be asked more fruitfully of Britain which was similar enough to continental Europe to make the difference more intriguing.

'Why was there no Marxism in Britain?' To answer that question, and to examine the larger anomaly of British exceptionalism, McKibbin advances four subsidiary questions:

- How far did the structure of the workforce promote collectivism?
- To what extent did the associational culture of the working class accelerate or impede the transmission of rejectionist ideologies?
- How far did the working class feel excluded from civil society? and
- To what degree did it possess a leadership capable of articulating and directing a specifically socialist working-class politics?

McKibbin proceeds to account for the special path taken by the British working class, though he does so without the aid of comparative analysis and in such a way that it is difficult for the reader to find a structured answer in the mass of independent variables which he brings to bear on the problem. His answer has significance, however, for a number of reasons. First it uses arguments which clearly inform his discussion of the nature of the Labour Party. It lays bare some of the interpretive issues which McKibbin's empirical histories conceal or leave implicit.

Second, McKibbin draws from a common pool of arguments about the 'peculiarities' of the British working class which have found favour with a number of influential historians of quite different ideological persuasions. Those arguments and theories have become almost received wisdom. They are overdue for a reappraisal.

McKibbin begins by drawing attention to the weakness of the collectivist elements affecting the working class. The trade unions reached only 15 per cent of the employed workforce in 1901 and an even smaller proportion of working-class women. Much of the workforce was seasonal labour, fragmented and unstable; the service sector was 'the most rapidly growing part of the Edwardian economy'; then there was 'that vast and unnumbered race who worked for themselves or others on a catch-as-catch-can basis' (McKibbin 1990a: 3). While shop-assistants and clerks were deprived of the social intercourse which facilitated organisation, and other workers were subjected to conditions which left them economically insecure and isolated, there were some workers – such as the penny capitalists of the London streets – who positively rejoiced in 'a jaunty and attractive individualism [that] was essential to life' (1990a). Other features of the economy served to localise industrial relations and encourage paternalism. During the Edwardian period only 100 firms employed more than 3,000 people, accounting for at most 700,000 workers. Small-scale enterprise dominated and relations with employers were either close or mediated by sub-employers. The sexual division of labour also militated against a communitarian solidarity by excluding women from politics as well as the workplace, while providing men with an occupational rather than a neighbourhood loyalty.

McKibbin assumes that the rich associational life of the working class stood in the way of both a rejectionist ideology and the development of a party successfully integrating these interests under its own roof, as the Social Democratic Party is said to have done in Wilhelmine Germany. Wage levels in Britain also permitted 'more or less everything that made up late nineteenth-century working class pastimes' and 'gave the working class a certain autonomy . . . not available to any other European work-force'. Thus any working-class party 'had to compete with an existing working-class culture which was stable and relatively sophisticated' (1990a: 13). Though McKibbin is also of the view that poverty and the daily struggle for survival did not conduce to a collectivist political commitment, the main thrust of his argument is that working-class leisure activities presented opportunities for an active engagement in society outside of politics: inclusion rather than social exclusion, then, but both beyond the reach of national politics. Political ambitions existed – indeed the working class was 'intensely political' according to McKibbin (1990: 296) – but these interests were 'scattered and localised' among a profusion of associations. Was this because there was no overwhelming sense of grievance which could have united the working class against civil society? McKibbin certainly considers this to be part of the argument. Walter Bagehot was right, on this view, to identify deference as a factor in political stability. But he supplied only half the explanation.

McKibbin points to the increasing ideological hegemony of Crown and Parliament in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the acceptability of both to the

working class and the security of the existing status order, institutional structure and class system which derived from it. How was this possible? The Crown evolved, he says, as an 'even-handed guarantor of the class-neutrality of Parliament'. Parliament itself was the focus for working-class political aspirations. Action outside of the political system, narrowly conceived, was widely accepted as illegitimate. In part this perception was informed by the observation that the upper classes themselves adhered to the rules of the political game. Patriotism – both cause and effect of crown worship – reinforced the sense that Crown and Parliament belonged to and represented the nation. But in McKibbin's view the working class was far from being the dupe of these arrangements:

it is entirely arguable that the traditions, catch-phrases, and ideological fragments that shaped working-class politics also helped to shape the politics of all other social classes . . . that the freedom of the middle and upper classes to *choose* one political strategy as against another was thereby limited by these historical imperatives, while, equally, the ability of the working classes to modify the social and economic relationships they inherited was proportionately enlarged. (1990a: 26)

The rules were thus binding on both sides. Coercion was ruled out to a greater degree in the UK than on the continent. The State was more or less compelled to keep out of industrial relations, and the unions by 1875 had a freedom of action 'unique' in Europe. A 'bloody-minded and ill-disciplined workforce' (1990a) had to be tolerated as part of this equation. The working class was subject to neither incorporation nor coercion, and was able to extract these benefits in return for its deference to the class and institutional status quo. It created its own institutions within that framework and produced its own leaders, rather than having to adopt them from among an alienated intelligentsia, as on the continent. The Labour Party was, of course, one of these institutions led by working-class men. But for Labour to establish itself with the craft-divided organised working class, whose interest in the party was 'only intermittent', it had to tread cautiously and embrace only those commitments which did not disturb any particular working-class interest. An anodyne ethical socialist rhetoric was acceptable on this basis, but so too was much of the liberal ideology. The career of Arthur Henderson (who was party secretary during 1911–34, foreign secretary in 1929–31 and, briefly, leader in 1931–32) illustrates all of these points.

For McKibbin, Henderson was by 1931 as representative of the rank and file 'as any individual could be' (1990b: 63). He was also a 'type' – one recognised by Lenin, Weber and Michels – for whom politics was both a vocation and a system of party patronage – a system which he had a hand in creating. Henderson was a leading Wesleyan Methodist, temperance reformer and an 'advanced radical' all his life. He was rooted in trade unionism and advanced his parliamentary career, with the help of Liberal patrons at every turn, through the Friendly Society of Iron-founders, as a candidate of the union's Liberal wing. Yet he was one of those who came to realise that his parliamentary career could not depend on the Liberals and it was this realisation which redirected him to the cause of independent labour representation, as it did for many similar men.

This turn did not involve an ideological shift from liberalism. Henderson's maiden speech was in favour of free trade. He supported the First World War in common with the vast majority of his fellow-trade unionists, though strongly sympathising with much for which the dissident and pacifist-leaning Union of Democratic Control stood. He also believed in harmonious class relationships, favoured the conciliation and arbitration of industrial disputes, and was openly class-collaborationist, as dictated by his social Christianity. He wanted Labour to represent the community, to become a 'national people's party'.

Here, however, he ran up against the 'industrial sectionalism' of the unions and the realisation that he was leader only on sufferance, unable to impose on the unions ideologies which adversely affected their interests. For McKibbin Henderson's career discloses what Labour was and what Labour could not become. Henderson was ideologically representative of a generation of Labour leaders who began by seeking parliamentary careers as Liberals and ended up being catapulted by the First World War into the leading place in British politics because of structural rather than ideological changes in the political system. The extension of the franchise and the enlarged role of the unions brought about by the war made this possible. But Henderson's leadership was always organisational and rhetorical, and its limits were set by the unions in which he had his roots.

The Evolution of the Labour Party (1974)

Up to 1924 the Labour Party was at all levels, according to McKibbin, a working-class organization . . . a truly proletarian party' (1974: xiii). Labour emerged from the war in 1918 even more 'an agent of the unions' than it had been in 1914, the war having probably strengthened the right-wing of the party rather than the left-wing. Though McKibbin says he is concerned primarily with the 'mass organization', rather than the parliamentary leadership, of the Labour Party for these reasons – arguing that its centre of gravity, at least until 1922, was extra-parliamentary – there are some curious omissions in his history. He has almost nothing to say about the political impact of the massive growth of the unions and the industrial conflict of the years 1910–14. On methodological grounds he does not consider the impact of the First World War on Labour and trade union politics, years in which the unions continued to grow, especially in heavy industry. The immediate post-war years, up to the severe slump of 1921, complete the cycle of events which saw trades union membership peak at 8.25 million. But in largely ignoring the industrial conflict, political ferment and structural changes of those years, McKibbin has eliminated much from his narrative that bears on class consciousness and socialism – Labour's dominant rhetoric by 1931 – and robs his narrative of a dynamic that helps to explain this otherwise unlikely ideological development.

McKibbin has two further objectives, beyond explaining the character of the Labour Party through an analysis of its mass organisation; first, to suggest reasons why it replaced the Liberal Party as the principal party of the Left; second, to explain why the Labour leadership was unable to emulate the German SPD and

create a *global* working-class movement. Henderson's career has already provided the reader with relevant evidence. More generally McKibbin sees a social gulf separating the leaders of the craft unions from the Liberal Party when the Labour Representation Committee was set up in 1900. The issues that divided organised labour from the Liberal Party were less of policy and more of class understood in this way: ideologically there was little difference between the two parties (1974: 54), as can be seen throughout the Edwardian years when Labour's electoral fortunes depended largely on avoiding contests with Liberal candidates and it was difficult to disentangle the Liberal and Labour elections campaigns. Thus at the elite level – as in the Gladstone–MacDonald electoral deal of 1903 – Labour depended on an agreement with the Liberals. But at the grass-roots level local Labour Parties depended on the unions: the local parties worked effectively when the unions gave their support. Labour organisation made no impression in constituencies held by candidates of the Miners' Federation, for example, until the union changed sides from Liberal to Labour – a process not yet completed in the localities by the outbreak of war. The grip of the unions on Labour by 1910 is also illustrated by the 11 trade unionists who sat on the 16-man National Executive Committee (NEC) of the party and the fact that all but 35,377 of the 1,430,539 members were trade unionists (over half a million of whom were miners). But it is illustrated also in the fact that until 1918 the characteristic local organ of the Labour Party was the trades council (1974: 33).

The self-restraint that made the understanding between the parliamentary Liberal and Labour Parties work began to break down at the local level between 1910 and 1914 as initiatives were undertaken locally to contest elections, whether the Liberals liked it or not. McKibbin resists the idea that this had much to do with growing ideological differences, or because of objectionable policies associated with the Liberal Government. He allows that the industrial militancy of 1911–13 may have contributed but says that this is difficult to prove. Instead he attributes the change to a growing 'feeling' that the Liberals were not working class while Labour was (1974: 70–1). This, it might be noted, is also difficult to prove, but McKibbin allows the discussion up to 1914 to end on that note. In fact he later suggests that the industrial unrest may have made local parties more militant and that the attraction of many union members, from among the growing number of trade unionists, to the Labour Party contributed to this change of mood. For at least some of those people the conversion to Labour may have had more to do with the industrial conflict than Labour's political activities (1974: 86).

That, however, is not the main thrust of his argument. Half the working class is still voteless, of course, but by 1914 Labour is stronger organisationally at local level, the trades councils are performing their political functions more effectively, and the Liberals reply in kind to the greater combativity of the local Labour organisations. The evidence, McKibbin suggests, is that, but for the outbreak of war between 150 and 170 Labour candidates would have contested a 1915 general election, including single-member constituencies, without regard for electoral pacts of the sort brokered and still favoured by Ramsay MacDonald. By-elections and municipal elections after 1910 suggest Labour was getting stronger (1974: 84–5).

McKibbin denies that there was any significant move to the Left during the war. The same people were in control of the party in 1918 as in 1914. The unions supported the war while the Left was defensive and divided. Opposition to socialism within the unions 'was inflamed by the war' (1974: 90) and the unions forced a change in the method of electing the NEC, in 1917, which further concentrated power in their hands. In that year a new political formation of trade unionists and co-operators was mooted – to be called the 'People's Party' – and though nothing came of it McKibbin offers it as evidence of the alienation of many trade unionists from the socialists. These were still largely to be found in the small ILP, which was excluded from the Reorganisation Committee which was put together to draft a new constitution for the Labour Party. Discussion of doctrine is absent from the record of the committee's deliberations. Henderson refrained from mentioning socialism during his tour of the districts to sell the new constitution. The real issue, from the unions' standpoint, was who would dominate the NEC (1974: 98 and 102). The 1918 TUC showed that there was still considerable support for a separate 'Trades Union Labour Party' even though the unions got their way on the substance of the new constitution. The Parliamentary Committee elected at this TUC was as patriotic as any elected before it, and, according to McKibbin, 'the membership of this committee was a more important determinant of the Labour Party's development than the break-up of the Liberal Party, the Russian Revolution, the work of the Webbs, or even what Henderson thought he was doing in 1917' (1974: 103).

The Russian Revolution, McKibbin allows, had taught Henderson 'that a powerful parliamentary alternative to Bolshevism was immediately required', and this also informed the new constitution (1974: 92). Clause 4 was vague enough to be acceptable in that context. The unions supported the sort of wartime collectivism that they had just experienced and they were 'more anxious' than they had been that the forms of collectivism they had always supported – such as selective nationalisations – should find their way into legislation. This was the point of overlap where the socialist minority and the trade unions could find common ground. But 'in Britain alone the left wing of the working class movement did not emerge from the war in some way stronger than it entered it . . . the war did not necessarily mean the defeat of socialism in Britain, it did mean the defeat of the socialists' (1974: 105–6). The strength of the Left in Scotland, particularly of the ILP, is allowed as an exception to this pattern, though McKibbin is quick to link it with the weakness of the Scottish unions outside Glasgow (1974: 163).

In 1924 *Labour Organiser* could find only two strong local Labour Parties based on individual membership – Ardwick and Woolwich. Local parties were still very reliant on union branches. Most funds were supplied locally, most candidates were chosen by the unions, not by head office. No further consideration was given to an electoral pact with the Liberals after 1918, and Labour contested as many seats as it could in the belief that it was competing for the same electorate as the Liberals. It consciously aimed to forestall a Liberal revival (1974: 120). The ease with which individual Liberals moved into the Labour Party, however, 'is evidence that the political differences between Liberal radicals and the Labour movement were by

no means unbridgeable', despite Labour's commitment to nationalisation. Differences in policy were less important, according to McKibbin, than 'social and psychological resentments which powerfully directed Labour's actions towards the Liberal Party' (1974: 121). This argument, the reader will note, has already been employed to explain the divergent paths of the two parties by 1914. McKibbin now informs us that the Liberals were 'bourgeois in a particular way' – 'self-consciously superior', patronising and condescending, they rubbed up the Labour leaders with their 'scarcely concealed snobbery' in entirely the wrong way. The minority Labour Government of 1924 was a 'propaganda exercise' designed to show that Labour could do without them.

Leading figures in the Labour Party were impressed by the organisational feats of the German SPD. Herbert Morrison did his best to emulate its methods in London, but his attempts to create a network of Labour associations constituting a genuine Labour community failed (1974: 171). McKibbin attributes this to the evident lack of unity of purpose of the British working class which was also revealed in the abortive attempts to institutionalize relations with the Co-operative Union in 1921. He alludes to the cultural enmeshing of the working class into the national culture – a point on which he is less sure in *Classes and Cultures* – partly because 'sport as a working-class pastime was so much more important in Britain than anywhere else in Europe' (1974: 234). Morrison's efforts succeeded, however, in frightening head office which was deeply suspicious of anything beyond its control. The party's relations with the Labour Research Department and the *Daily Herald* further illustrate its centralising tendencies and its concern about 'troublemakers', especially communist troublemakers. Trade union pressure 'is the most insistent theme' in these episodes, though one which complemented the centralising instincts of party leaders such as MacDonald. But what about the spectacular collapse of trade union membership from 1920, the defeat of the General Strike and the reprisals which followed it? Was Labour's apparent dependence on the unions undisturbed by these developments? Did its growing strength in local government fail to supply a different dynamic? McKibbin has no answers to these questions. Indeed they do not arise, – even in his later discussions of the inter-war years.

At this point it is instructive to turn to McKibbin's explanation for Labour's success in eclipsing the post-war Liberals (for an alternative view, see Tanner 1990: 1–16). For McKibbin the Representation of the People Act of 1918 'was of the first importance' in Labour's eclipse of the Liberals (McKibbin, Matthew and Kay 1990: 82). The 1916 split in the Liberal Party is downplayed as a causal factor. McKibbin argues that the Labour splits of 1914, August–September 1917 and November 1918, which received as much contemporary publicity as had the Liberal split, suggest that there were other reasons for the decline of the Liberals than the splits themselves. Nor does he accept that the Liberals were somehow more averse to wartime collectivism than the Tories. The war itself, in this view, is overrated as the cause of Labour's success and the Liberal's decline (1974: 240). Everything, according to McKibbin, points to 'Labour's enduring *ante-bellum* character'. It simply continued to reap the benefits of 'an already existing industrial class consciousness'.

Because 'it had no life apart from the unions it gained electorally from their growth'. Meanwhile the Liberals suffered from their inability to claim the loyalties of any class. But the union-based class consciousness which benefited Labour also set limits on what it could achieve. The working class 'did not lead their social lives within the confines of their Party, nor did they regard Party allegiances as the judge of their cultural values' (1974: 245). Politics had to compete with 'too many other things'; the working class had not suffered the active persecution visited upon their German counterparts; and the unions had more limited objectives than the Hendersons and Morrisons and held the power to get their way. In McKibbin's view Labour inevitably failed, in a nation 'profoundly divided by class', to break out of its electoral dependence on the unions, despite a propaganda appeal that was designed to be classless. He concludes with a remark that might have been intended as a riposte to Miliband: 'If it is objected that it has not served the cause of socialism or even the "true" interests of the working class the answer is that it was never designed to do so' (1974: 247).

Class relations

McKibbin confronts the paradox of a working-class party that was unable to attract the votes of most of the working class – despite the growth of class consciousness – when he turns to the inter-war years and the Conservative electoral hegemony which followed the introduction of universal suffrage. He is clear that by 1918 'society's relations with the working class had at last become the central question' (1990c: 259), and yet a reasonable estimate suggests that by 1931 around 55 per cent of the working class voted for the Conservative-dominated national candidates while 50 per cent did so in 1935. The Conservative hegemony rested on this 'exceptionally high working-class vote and the tenacious social unity of the non-working-classes'. From 1920 Britain lived under a deflationary regime which tolerated mass unemployment in the interests of holders of money. Finance was put before manufacturing, 'the anxieties of one social class over those of all others' (1990c: 267). It was the middle class which benefited most from these arrangements and the working class which suffered. The middle class flocked into the Conservative Party in the early 1920s. Its individual membership was double that of Labour's by 1925. The social composition of the parliamentary party was increasingly middle class. The links seem clear. But the real strength of the Tories was their ability to articulate the fears, prejudices and aspirations of 'the public'. Labour's weakness was its identification with the organised working class, a sectional interest. 'The public' was everyone else. The Conservative preponderance among women is explicable in these terms. 'The social world of the organized working class was sectional, collectivist and masculine'. But 'the public' was a status category to which women could belong, as could the unorganised workers, the seemingly unorganisable workers, and the anti-union workers. When representatives of 'the public' spoke of the working class they meant 'manual workers in well organized trades with aggressive unions' (1990c: 271). In doing so they drew on a reservoir of 'ideologically determined class stereotypes and conventional wisdoms'

which helped to mobilise nearly all those who were not working class and then much of the working class as well.

In the excellent essay ‘The “social psychology” of unemployment in inter-war Britain’ (1990d) McKibbin explores this issue in relation to the State’s management of unemployment. The grim and shabby Labour Exchanges, he tells us, were regarded by the unemployed as ‘enemy territory’. The staff were primed to find abuse. A ‘permanently interrogatory air’ accompanied the hunt for scroungers as the unemployed were subjected ‘to a futile and sometimes brutal ritual in which few believed’. After 1931 the ‘means test’ intruded humiliatingly into working-class privacy.

Thus one of the purposes, and certainly one of the consequences of unemployment insurance legislation was to marginalize the unemployed, to divide them by newer and ever more refined discriminations and, by a public pursuit of the scrounger, to confirm politically necessary stereotypes. (1990d: 252)

The stereotypes included workers who were prone to endless industrial dispute as well as the unemployed who would not work and the scroungers who, though they might also have jobs, made high taxes necessary by their scrounging and cheating (1990c: 273). The dole was the preferred method for treating the unemployed because it enabled the Conservatives to maintain a dependent workforce and keep these stereotypes alive, while diverting the political energies of the unemployed into the dole bureaucracy in pursuit of fair payment – localising and rendering them harmless in the process. It was one of the ways in which the State, even though it might not have created working-class Conservatism, helped to entrench it.

McKibbin identifies three ways in which the State did this. First, by identifying the Labour Party exclusively with its unionised base and identifying ‘the political idea’ of the working class exclusively with a necessarily sectional Labour Party. Second, by ensuring that everyone outside this sectional working class would define themselves in opposition to it. Third, by trying to weaken and then marginalise the old unionised working class. The deflationary financial regime adopted in 1920 had assisted this process, as had the provocation and defeat of the General Strike in 1926. But so too did propaganda depicting the unemployed as helpless and incompetent authors of their own misfortune who burdened the public with their discontents and incapacities (1990c: 288–90).

Classes and Cultures (1998)

In *Classes and Cultures* McKibbin further develops some of these arguments while exploring many aspects of class culture in immense detail. The Labour Party, as I said at the outset, drops largely out of view and there is much in the book that can be ignored here. For my purposes it is relevant that McKibbin now recognises that ‘the First World War seriously disturbed the pattern of English class relations’ (1998: 528). The war is the origin of middle-class discontent. By 1918 the middle class (just 13–15 per cent of the population) was defined by, more than anything

else, its 'anti-working class' outlook (1998: 50). The war and its immediate aftermath eroded its money and property by inflation and taxation. At the same time powerful and growing trade unions had emerged. The Lloyd George coalition further inflamed middle-class hatred. It was perceived as a 'rapacious and extravagant plutocracy' that was nevertheless always ready to placate the unions. The Tories turned this situation to their advantage by giving priority to the defence of the middle class – portrayed as the defence of the public and the constitution. The propertied regrouped and a broad 'anti-socialist' coalition was created which survived into the 1930s. From as early as 1920 the balance of class power, disturbed by the war, was 'normalised' by deflation and rising unemployment. But middle-class perceptions scarcely altered in response to their improving relative position. Embittered class relations remained a factor throughout the decade as middle-class priorities dominated government policy. The intense fear of loss of social esteem and relative status simply persisted as a factor in middle-class attitudes well after the wartime conditions which first gave them substance had disappeared (1998: 104–5). The success of Warwick Deeping's *Sorrell and Son* (1925) – which McKibbin discusses as an example of a 'literature of conflict', a genre popular with the middle class in which class conflict was a central theme – is indicative of this fear and loathing. The book went through forty-one editions and innumerable impressions, and 'was read and re-read long out of its time' (1998: 481). It was distinguished by 'its unvarnished hostility to the working class'. By the 1930s the mood has changed, according to McKibbin; the more self-confident middle-class tone of A. J. Cronin's 1937 novel *The Citadel* is taken as indicative of the trend.

But what of the working class, constituting 78–72 per cent of the population in the years up to 1951? For those in work living standards rose in the inter-war years, as prices fell after 1920. But nearly all working-class men and women experienced some period of unemployment (1998: 151). Unemployment was heavily concentrated by industry and region, of course, but long-term unemployment was largely a 1930s' phenomenon. Those affected were impoverished, marginalised and humiliated by the experience. The trade unions at best organised only 55 per cent of working men, 45 per cent of the workforce. Only one-quarter of eligible women joined a union. In no year did the number of days lost through strikes even exceed days lost by one public holiday (1998: 144). Union members complained that their leaders were not radical enough, and McKibbin admits that they did indeed seek to avoid strikes. Yet their public image was one of strike proneness. The working class was in reality divided. Its experience varied by region, occupation and gender. McKibbin depicts a working-class family that was often politically fractured. The female proportion of the workforce was stable at around 30 per cent, but the proportion who worked on a more or less equal basis with men declined and the great majority of working women were single rather than married. Role segregation was thus entrenched in the family and promoted different views of the world. The greater propensity of women to vote Conservative may have something to do with this (1998: 518). Unfortunately, McKibbin says nothing about Labour's success in recruiting women – they made up 40 per cent of its individual membership by 1930 – and their role in the evolution of its social and welfare policies is unexamined.

Let us not forget, however, that the bigger issue is why the British working class gave the Conservatives more support than Centre-Right parties elsewhere in Europe normally received from blue-collar workers. I will not repeat the arguments already employed on this issue. Suffice to say that McKibbin portrays a defensive, introverted working class and a defeatist and fatalistic working-class culture. The workers demanded only to be left alone (1998:161). Men may have occupied a public world centred on work, but collective opinion prohibited any enthusiasm for work that may have separated the individual from the norms of the larger group. A churlish 'folk-Marxism', independent of actual party-political allegiances, was not uncommon. Manual labour was the source of all value, in this view, though not white-collar clerical labour or that of officialdom – both of which, according to popular prejudice, contributed 'nothing' to wealth production. Pilfering was 'intrinsic to factory culture' and seen as legitimate. Long memories of real or imagined grievances hung over 'many industries'.

Though a sense of historical grievance underpinned the Labour Party itself, grievances did not always translate into a political affirmation of working-class interests. The working class was accustomed to being talked down to. Though sports' mad, it allowed almost all sporting bodies to be run by a self-selecting, all-male, upper and upper-middle-class clique (cricket, racing, rugby union, tennis, athletics, golf, boxing), when they were not run by local brewers, butchers and bakers (football). McKibbin discusses some of the ways in which the authorities sought to reinforce working-class deference. The Reithian BBC excluded the working class and treated it with a snobbish paternalism. Censorship was used against 'anything which undermined respect for authority' (1998: 424). Lord Tyrell, president of the British Board of Film Censors, quoted in illustration of this point, said in 1937: 'we may take pride in observing that there is not a single film showing in London today which deals with any of the burning issues of the day' (1998: 425). But it is fair to say that conscious manipulation of this sort – though we have already encountered it in the 'politically necessary stereotypes' – occupies a minor place in McKibbin's argument; the structural barriers to a combative, pro-Labour class consciousness seem far more potent in producing the Tory hegemony than did mere propaganda, even when it had institutional reinforcement.

The only threat to the huge coalition of popular support for Conservatism which loomed on the horizon in the 1930s was external, according to McKibbin. It was the Second World War that 'threw British history and, even more, English history off course' (1998: 531). The war eroded deference and renewed the traditional working class by restoring the old staple industries on which it depended. Full employment was the context for trade union growth, and the growth of the north and its political culture, at the expense of the south and its political culture. The war universalised working-class political culture and allowed Labour to recruit men and women who had stood outside that culture in the 1930s, as in Birmingham. An unprecedented politicisation took place and a social democratic definition of *democracy* came to prevail over the middle-class individualism that had ruled in the 1930s. The Labour Government of 1945 failed to exploit this situation to the full, according to McKibbin, by remaining outside the sphere of civil society

and leaving most of its conservative bastions untouched. The old social oligarchies in sport and education survived unscathed, as did the institutions of the State, including its 'ideological apparatus'. 'Outside the realm of social services or nationalized industries the visitor would not have observed a social democracy', with the result that the political settlement of 1945 depended on the physical survival of the industrial working class, rather than the diffusion within civil society of social democracy as an ideology (1998: 535–6).

Concluding remarks

If our understanding of a party cannot fail to depend on our understanding of the social classes which form its main constituency, Labour history must be rooted in working-class history. Conservatism and liberalism necessarily loom larger in the analysis once we examine twentieth-century working-class politics. McKibbin's argument sees this and realises that it involves class relationships and class cultures. The prolonged exclusion of Labour from government also invites us to examine the role of the State in managing class conflicts and class cultures to the party's disadvantage. But it is clear that this approach assumes that it is the underlying historical situation of the working class, its relationship to society and its consciousness that matter. McKibbin, in this mode, is arguing that the social is determinant, while politics and ideology are merely reflective. The new-born Labour Party was thus the product of the temper and situation of the working class and the intellectuals associated with it as these had evolved during the second half of the nineteenth century. The working class had been remade in these decades and a distinctively new pattern of working-class culture had come into existence, characterised by an introverted and defensive conservatism. The subaltern class was conscious of itself as different and separate. This sectional or corporate self-consciousness enabled it to create organisations confirming its social apartheid. Such organisations could be aggressive in their defence of 'the workers', but they accepted the conservative hierarchy of British society. There was no radical, alienated intelligentsia in Britain and the working class had no use for one.

These arguments have been fashioned over the years by historians such as Anderson (1964), Nairn (1964) and Stedman Jones (1974 and 1983), as well as by McKibbin. Missing from them all is the sort of comparative analysis which would seem to be essential if a case for British exceptionalism is to be sustained. Did 'other countries' have stronger trades union movements, industrial establishments that were typically bigger, workforces that were more homogenous and more engaged in politics than the British? Was British collectivism really weaker than it was in the relatively backward rural societies of Europe – many of which, nonetheless, had Marxist parties? Many items in McKibbin's list are unconvincing as ingredients of a British exceptionalism. The 'other countries' which this implicit comparison rests upon really boils down to just one – Wilhemine Germany. But close analysis of Germany before 1914 demonstrates that the differences were not as great as is often supposed. Large sections of the party were never much influenced by Marxism; the growing power of the trade unions within the SPD was pragmatic and reformist in

impetus; and many millions of workers lay beyond the party's orbit (Berger 1994; Berger and Boughton 1995). As in Britain, a deep loyalty to the State was evident in Germany (Van der Linden 1998: 286), and it is not clear that the associational life of the German working class was more conducive to political class consciousness than it was in Britain. Even 'the distinction which is commonly made between a British party which was merely an electoral machine and a German community-oriented party proves on inspection to have little basis in fact', according to one thorough analysis of the subject (Berger 1994: 142). The gap between working-class life and the culture of the labour movement, which McKibbin makes so much of for Britain, was on this reading common to both countries.

The relatively open, rule-based, political system may be a stronger contender for 'special' status, but this too can be over-drawn. Here McKibbin also concurs with earlier analyses, such as that by Nairn (1970: 14–20), in seeing the British constitution as the main institutional mechanism of conservative rule. The Conservative hegemony was based on a paternalist authority, in this view, rather than on a coercive power. It drew upon traditions and customs of deference but made significant concessions, too, such as in tolerating free collective bargaining. The German State and employers were undoubtedly more repressive than their British counterparts where organised labour and the socialists were concerned in the period 1880–1914. There is a good case for believing that this was related to the fact that Germany was experiencing the immense social stresses engendered by industrial capitalism which Britain had already passed through in the first half of the nineteenth century. In that earlier period the British State had been just as repressive as the German State was after 1870. Nevertheless, the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party grew up in different worlds in this respect, and it is arguable that the more liberal State and the more conciliatory employers played a significant role in integrating and moderating the Labour movement in Britain (Geary 1989: 3–4).

The Labour Party was born after the craft unions had already established a *modus vivendi* with the British State and the employers. Labour was marked from the outset by the outlook associated with these organisations of the working-class elite. Both accepted the existing institutional order as the inevitable political framework of action, and action was accordingly conservative and economic. Labour was joined to the unions at birth, and for McKibbin the party could not avoid a corresponding class identity, despite the national pretensions of some of its leaders. But in this view politics was always, in any case, marginal in most working-class lives. Outside its narrow reaches, in the private realm, a multitude of pastimes and hobbies, clubs and societies flourished in the working-class towns. These provided a relatively rich associational and recreational culture to which individual historians have attached differing meanings. Thus these activities variously entertained and compensated the working class, perhaps diverting and distracting it from politics (as Stedman Jones suggests of the music hall) or (in McKibbin's emphasis) creatively engaged the lower orders in civil society and gave them an identification with it.

McKibbin's work closely engages with this culture but supplies no compelling reasons to refute the old argument that a relatively rich associational culture

broadly encourages political participation. *Classes and Cultures* supplies a mass of interesting detail but much of it is largely divorced from the political generalisations that appear in the book's Preface and Conclusion. The social and cultural history of a class or classes are complex matters. What counts in our attempt to investigate class politics? Though McKibbin writes entertainingly about working-class gambling, for example, his discussion adds nothing to the declared central purpose of his study, which is to disclose the importance of culture in shaping working-class political behaviour and explain why those who had authority in 1918 still possessed it in 1951. A bigger and related cultural problem is left ambivalently unresolved – namely the relation of working-class culture to ruling-class culture. We are told that 'England had no common culture, rather a set of overlapping cultures' (1998: 527). It took the Second World War, on this account, to assimilate the working class into the ruling 'moral consensus' (1998: 535–6).

These contentions are consistent with the portrait of the working class as set apart, little affected by official culture, introverted, defeatist and fatalistic. But what was the inter-war 'public', which I discussed earlier, if it did not contain much, if not most, of the working class? Surely this suggests common values and beliefs uniting millions of working-class men and women with the classes above them in the social hierarchy? McKibbin supplies plenty of evidence of the hegemony of the dominant culture, as I have shown. Members of the upper class are said to have had ideological authority; the monarchy is depicted as culturally central to British life; patriotic etiquette is widely and spontaneously observed. He also argues that the State played a significant role in shaping the 'ideologically necessary stereotypes' of the unemployed. The working class does not seem so insulated in the light of these considerations. Indeed, it is arguable that all sorts of middle-class values permeated the working class through church and chapel, work (particularly domestic service and small-scale establishments) and leisure. The massive working-class Tory vote is clearly related to all of this, though it is not clear whether McKibbin sees Conservative electoral dominance as the effect or the cause of what he calls 'the structural and ideological bases of the pre-war system' (1990c: 290).

The realm of politics and public discourse is an unexplored continent in McKibbin's work on class cultures. Governments, parties, pressure groups, newspapers, local government, the education and the intellectual formation of the working class are conspicuously absent from the analysis. In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), Rose makes use of numerous unpublished working-class sources, as well as published memoirs, autobiographies, diaries and surveys. McKibbin's 'eye-witness' sources in *Classes and Cultures* are by comparison relatively narrow and predictable, and are faithfully adhered to rather than critically engaged with. This problem is not confined to *Classes and Cultures*. The State is only ever the focus of McKibbin's analysis in relation to one issue – the management of unemployment. On that subject, McKibbin concedes to the State a role which is absent from the social determinism informing most of his writings. Yet the period 1880–1950 was one of unprecedented tumult in political affairs, both foreign and domestic. It must be considered a major flaw in McKibbin's account of the formation and evolution of the Labour Party that imperialism and foreign

relations, the impact of the wars and many significant domestic conflicts are absent from the analysis. Why should active politics be confined to explaining attitudes to the unemployed?

The role of the State and the political parties has a bearing on many of the issues raised by McKibbin's work. The three periods of Labour governance up to 1950, for example, clearly bear on the question of Labour's identity as a sectional or (if only in aspiration) a national force, but they are never considered at any length. The exception is the essay 'The economic policy of the second Labour Government' in *The Ideologies of Class* (1990), but this is concerned with the specific issue of whether the Government could have reflate the economy in the circumstances of 1929–31. There can be no doubt that Labour sought to govern in 'the national interest', and it is counter-intuitive to suppose that those spells in office made no impression on 'the public'. Even if we root the Labour Party in the social history of the working class we still have to ask what the party did to shape the politics of its natural constituency?

The same question can be asked of the affiliated trade unions and the socialists. This side of the equation receives scant attention in McKibbin's work. For one so interested in culture the neglect of the Labour movement's own political discourse is a major lacuna. For Labour – trade unionist or socialist – was in competition with some of the dominant values discussed above. It is not at all clear that the 'intense class consciousness' which McKibbin refers to was purely defensive. This is to underestimate the extent to which even the mundane but central slogan of labourism – 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay' – implied a critique of the existing order. Socialist values could be made to connect to widely held views about the injustices of work and pay, and even the middle class was not immune to the critique of *laissez-faire* capitalism which existed in British politics throughout McKibbin's period – as the history of the relation of the middle-class to the welfare state shows. McKibbin sees that the economic and social experiences of the inter-war years may have unsettled the ruling orthodoxies, but he does not pursue this insight.

The discontinuities which I referred to at the beginning of this chapter deprive McKibbin's work of a possible historical dynamic. So do the silences. The two world wars supply material for assertions rather than for sustained analysis. The industrial unrest of 1910–20 is mentioned only in passing, as is the conflict in industry during the embittered 1920s. Class conflict is an acknowledged factor in McKibbin's argument but is never examined as an element in industrial conflict and in many of the disciplinary economic and social policies exercised by both the State and the employers. The consciousness of the working class appears largely unaffected by such class conflict as McKibbin does discuss, if only because he does not address the question of how the major political experiences of Britain since 1914 have made and remade working-class beliefs and values. The emergence of socialism in relation to the formation of working-class consciousness is neglected perhaps because of this lacuna. *Socialism*, indeed, is a word that McKibbin rarely has any use for, and it is difficult to find any basis for its emergence as the dominant discourse of the Labour Party after 1931 in anything that he finds important in the previous thirty years.

The working-class institutions which McKibbin tracks up to 1951 actually peaked after his period closes and important features of working-class culture survived for another twenty years alongside the discourse of socialism, the party's dominant doctrine. If the working class was remade in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it seems plausible to assume that its characteristic way of life took some time to become embedded and generalised. Though the working class has never been a single homogenous entity, the images associated with it in the period 1870–1950 – the urban terraced houses, the mass employees of heavy industry, the crowds of flat-capped men at football matches – are images which reveal a nationalisation–standardisation of culture that was real enough. It is a pity that the sorts of questions which McKibbin asks about the Edwardian working class are not pursued in his later work. Surely we would find that at least some of the aspects of its fractured character prior to 1914 were subjected to processes of convergence and homogeneity? The widespread experience of unemployment, economic and other forms of insecurity, employment in similar types of manual work, common experiences of urban life, the rise of Labour in local government – surely there are nationalising trends here to counter the localising influences which McKibbin dwells on pre-1914?

It remains true, in the face of these trends, that Labour never managed more than 37 per cent of the total vote prior to 1945 and that the Conservative Party enjoyed greater working-class support. McKibbin's work has forced us to acknowledge and seek to explain these facts, and his discussion of class relations, the State's management of unemployment and the Conservative defence of the 'public' has provided signposts for others to follow in search of answers.

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