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How to study the Labour Party: contextual, analytical and theoretical issues

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The political analysis and the political economy of the British Labour Party have tended to concern themselves principally with the concrete and the substantive. This is both unremarkable and entirely legitimate. Yet something is potentially lost. For while an aim of the present collection is to discuss the principal positions of some of the leading exponents in this literature, it cannot be doubted that the literature rests largely on rarely acknowledged and generally unstated assumptions about basic analytical questions. If we are to encourage dialogue between competing interpretations of Labour, we might benefit from rendering such assumptions explicit. Moreover, the present is a particularly opportune time for such reflections, as contemporary political analysis is perhaps more conscious than it has ever been of its most fundamental analytical assumptions (see Hay 2002a).

In what follows four core themes are identified, each of which can be associated with what might tentatively be termed the 'new political science of British politics'. Each serves to highlight a distinctive aspect of the issue of causality; and each has a special relevance to labour studies in general and to the political science and the political economy of Labour in particular. They are:

- the relationship between structure and agency, context and conduct;
- the relationship between the discursive and the material, between the ideas held about the world and that world itself;
- the relative significance of political, economic and cultural factors; and
- the relative significance of domestic, international and transnational factors.

Before considering each of these themes in more detail, it is important to enter a few cautionary remarks. Arguments such as that presented here are unavoidably controversial and they need to be handled with care: after all, political scientists are, by convention, wary of analytical prescription. It is important, then, at the outset that to clarify the aims and intentions of what follows, while cautioning against certain potential misinterpretations.

First, although the argument presented here has important implications for the conduct of labour studies more generally, and although the chapter does make the general case for reinserting labour within the analysis of the Labour Party, the sub-

stantive contribution of this chapter is more limited. Given constraints of space I confine my observations to writings on the political science and the political economy of the British Labour Party published since the 1980s. Second, and crucially, while the argument will not be entirely neutral in respect of interpretations of Labour, I do not aim to champion a particular interpretation (for that, see Coates and Hay 2001; Hay 1999). This chapter is not so much concerned with the substantive detail of particular accounts of recent Labour history as it is with the compatibility of specific interpretations with the theoretical assumptions which ostensibly inform them. Consequently, what follows is consistent with a range of diverse descriptive accounts, substantive interpretations and theoretical positions – positions the author does not necessarily share. The chapter is a call for greater theoretical reflexivity, clarity and internal consistency rather than a more partisan appeal for a particular approach.

My aim is, in essence, two-fold. First I highlight a series of key analytical issues. These divide the protagonists in what at first appear to be substantive disputes that might be adjudicated empirically (such as the roles of political volition and economic imperatives in the trajectory of Labour's economic policy since the mid-1980s). Frequently, in such controversies, it is not so much the empirical evidence as the selection of what counts as evidence in the first place and the interpretation placed on it that divides analysts. Here the trading of empirical claim and counter-claim may serve only to institutionalise a dialogue of the deaf. The result is that underlying disagreements in fundamental theoretical or analytical assumptions remain unacknowledged and unexamined. Drawing attention to the implicit and often intuitive assumptions on which such contemporary disputes so frequently hinge, may serve to, first, promote greater analytical clarity; second, facilitate theoretical dialogue and reflexivity; and, finally, encourage analysts to render explicit the core analytical assumptions on which their work is premised and of which one might legitimately expect a degree of internal consistency.

This is part and parcel of an approach to the conduct of theoretical and empirical debate which judges accounts by the standards they themselves propose rather than those foisted upon them externally. It places a premium on theoretical consistency, but is largely neutral with regard to the substantive content of accounts consistent with a given set of (acknowledged) analytical assumptions. Of course, this is not to suggest that in evaluating contending accounts we should restrict ourselves to judgements based purely on criteria of theoretical consistency. Work that draws freely on implicit but nonetheless incommensurate analytical assumptions should be exposed as doing so. This, however, is much easier if we can make such issues as explicit as possible in the first place.

The second objective is perhaps rather more prescriptive. I seek to highlight a range of issues which, though perhaps characteristic of a 'new political science of British politics', have arguably tended to be overlooked or, at least, are insufficiently developed in the political analysis and the political economy of Labour. Three issues in particular might here be noted as structuring much of the discussion in the sections that follow. They relate to the needs to:

- contextualise contemporary political dynamics economically and contemporary economic dynamics politically;
- transcend the artificial distinction between domestic, comparative and international or transnational analysis and develop further the capacity to relate political and economic dynamics at a variety of spatial scales; and
- exercise greater sensitivity to the role of ideas as causal variables in the analysis and interpretation of political and economic processes.

As may already be clear, the agenda of this chapter is informed by a growing sense of the emergence of a more reflexive, more modest and more consciously theory-informed political analysis. It is with this 'new political science of British politics' that I should perhaps begin.

A new political science of British politics?

Some might think it premature to suggest there is now a 'new political science of British politics' – and the label is undoubtedly one that few would volunteer as a badge of self-identification. Moreover, the political science of British politics has always been characterised by diversity and intellectual pluralism. Nonetheless, a series of common and consistent themes has emerged in recent work that reflects a new sprit of analytical reflexivity among more theory-inclined analysts. While such themes are by no means confined to studies of British politics, their effects are now filtering into more substantive analyses, including contemporary work on the political development of Britain (see, for instance, Bevir and Rhodes 1998, 1999; English and Kenny 1999; Kerr 2001; Marsh, Buller, Hay, Johnston, Kerr, McAnulla and Watson 1999; Smith 1999). What is perhaps most interesting about this emergent political science is the extent to which its distinctive analytical concerns are shared by an unlikely assortment of authors defending a variety of otherwise antagonistic theoretical approaches. Though divided by the absence of a common theoretical perspective, self-styled behaviouralists, philosophical realists, neo-institutionalists, constructivists and interpretivists increasingly appeal to a common set of core analytical concerns.

In summarising these concerns (Hay 2002b: 11), it can be said that there is

- a tendency to place contemporary dynamics in their historical (that is temporal) and national (or spatial) context;
- a desire to emphasise how institutions and ideas mediate the political process, along with a related concern to track change from inputs (intentions and context) to outcomes (whether intended or unintended);
- a greater willingness to recognise the uncertainty of outcomes and hence to acknowledge the significance of unintended consequences;
- the more open acknowledgement of the need to locate events in Britain in relation to those in comparable countries;
- a recognition of the blurring of a once rigid demarcation between domestic and international politics and a growing recognition of the significance of

- institutional forces, such as the European Union, that operate above the lone nation state;
- a broadening of what might legitimately be studied by political analysts. This is reflected in a greater recognition, say, of the role of cultural or economic factors in determining what might appear to be purely political developments; and
 - a greater appreciation of the contribution to political outcomes of ideational variables (such as values, paradigms, ideology and rhetoric).

Taken together these closely related concerns constitute, just as they also reflect, a challenge to the modes of analysis that have hitherto dominated the political science and political economy of post-war British politics. They have implications for the analysis of the Labour Party and for labour studies more generally. It is to these that I now turn, beginning with factors specific to the political analysis of Labour, before turning to those that might be thought to apply more generally to contemporary political analysis.

Revisiting the political analysis of labour/Labour

It is tempting to suggest that while the new political science of British politics, tentatively outlined above, has important implications for political analysis in general it has no specific implications for the political analysis of Labour. For the analysis of Labour is, in the end, an exercise in analysis like any other. In so far as the new political science poses challenges, it does so largely independently of the specific object of their analytical attentions.

This is undoubtedly the case. However, there is perhaps one exception that follows directly from the above. It can be stated simply: labour studies should not be regarded, as sometimes it is, as a separate or independent sphere of analysis. This is, in fact, a specific implication of a more general point. The new political science identified above is distinctly post-disciplinary in its outlook. It is deeply suspicious of arbitrarily imposed boundaries and the associated apportioning of primary variables (party variables to political science, macro-economic variables to economics, interactive variables to sociology, and so forth). It has, if anything, even less sympathy with sub-disciplinary sectarianism. While labour studies can, then, be seen as a sub-field of political economy, political science or political history, it can also be more progressively presented as a post-disciplinary arena in which the tools appropriate to the analysis and interpretation of labour – whatever their origins – can be brought together. In so far as this describes the practice of contemporary labour studies, it might be seen to herald the emergence of the new political science of British politics; in so far as it does not, it can only benefit from such a development.

If there are few, if any, specific implications of the new political science for the political analysis of Labour, then there are nonetheless a series of points which, though potentially generalisable, might be regarded as having particular purchase

for a post-disciplinary labour studies. The first of these is, again, stated simply, though its implications are more involved. It concerns the place of labour within labour–Labour studies: labour, in terms of the organised or disorganised working class, needs to be reinserted into the analysis of Labour the political organisation. It might seem strange to associate such a claim with contemporary currents in British political science. It would be perverse indeed to suggest that there is anything terribly original or innovative about putting the ‘L’ back into labour studies. Yet, though not, perhaps, immediately obvious, there are clear links between the latter’s more reflexive and integrated approach to political analysis and the return to labour in labour studies.

At this point it is important to note that there are plenty of analysts of both Labour (Party) and labour (movement) who need no reminder of labour studies’ erstwhile object of analysis. The point, however, is that here new political science and traditional labour studies might speak with one voice. For, in their attempts to scrutinise and interrogate its previously unacknowledged and intuitive assumptions, exponents of the new political science have tended to broaden their concept of ‘the political’ and to reject the pervasive and corrosive legacy of pluralist assumptions (Marsh 2002). The result has been:

- a rejection of input-loaded models of political processes (such as pluralism and elitism);
- an associated reconnection of political inputs and outcomes;
- a far greater emphasis upon the uneven distribution of strategic resources; and,
- a related concern with a range of distributional asymmetries (such as class, gender and ethnicity).

Each serves to reposition the analysis of labour at the heart of labour studies – where it rightly belongs.

A second observation also chimes with traditional labour studies. We should be careful to interrogate assumptions we may be tempted to internalise relating to Labour’s highly mythologised past (see also Fielding 2000a, 2000b). With a Labour prime minister currently resident in Downing Street, a fact attributed by many to the party’s ability to distance itself in opposition from a particular construction of a previous incarnation (‘Old Labour’), it is more important than ever that we scrutinise such constructions. It is perhaps equally imperative that we acknowledge the significance of such popular fictions as potential causal factors in their own right (a point to which we return). Thus, the appeal of such constructions should itself be of interest. The point is, however, that there is world of difference between internalising such convenient fictions as baseline assumptions that might inform analysis of the present and examining their conditions of emergence, diffusion and persuasion. Collectively, students of Labour need to engage in rather more of the latter and rather less of the former. The pressures on political analysts of all persuasions to incorporate an ever-greater range of variables in a (supposedly) ever-more complex and interdependent world are considerable and growing. Arguably, they make analysis of the present increasingly difficult. Yet in such a context, it is, if anything, more important that we refuse to trade in our historical sense for the

mistaken promise of achieving a greater purchase on the present by concentrating on more obviously immediate factors (for useful attempts to locate recent developments in a historical context, see Brivati and Bale 1997; Brivati and Heffernan 2000; Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo 2000).

Third, it is important (as arguably it always was) to examine and re-examine Labour's complex associations with the highly distinctive European tradition of social democracy, a distinctiveness we overlook at our peril. The term *social democracy* has become increasingly slippery as it has become ever-more-loosely invoked and ever-more-intimately connected to discussions of the future of Centre-Left political parties across Europe. What this suggests is the value of comparative labour studies. Important points follow from an attempt to locate contemporary British political dynamics comparatively. In particular, Labour's connection to European social democracy was always somewhat tenuous and indirect (see, for instance, Clift 2001; Drucker 1979; George and Haythorne 1996; Minkin 1991). It is surely telling, for instance, that Jose Harris's exhaustive survey (2000) of Labour's social and political thought for the centenary history of the party makes no reference, explicit or implicit, to the European tradition of social democracy. The influence of continental social democracy on Labour's thinking has been modest indeed.

Additionally, by any institutional definition of social democracy which looks at outcomes rather than merely at articulated aspirations, Labour's much-vaunted post-war social democratic past looks rather different. Such a definition of social democracy (as a regime-type as distinct from a political ideology or ethos) is conventional in comparative political economy, though rare in British labour studies. For the authors who deploy such a conception (for instance, Berman 1998; Garrett 1998; Pontusson 1992), Britain is – and throughout the post-war period always has been – the European archetype of market liberalism, not of social democracy.

Moreover, as Mark Wickham-Jones (2000) has persuasively argued, Labour's early 'modernisation' process under Kinnock and Smith – a process more conventionally seen as a slow march from social democracy – was in fact animated, perhaps for the first time in the party's history, by a genuine attempt to embrace the European social democratic tradition (see also Clift 2001; George and Haythorne 1996; Sassoon 1998; and, for evidence of this kind of thinking among Kinnock's closest advisors, Eatwell 1992). Of course, this abortive strategy was never more than aspirational – and, as aspirations go, a rather optimistic one at that. Certainly the completion of the modernisation process under Blair represented a systematic repudiation of such a vision and an attempt, instead, to project a 'Third Way', 'renewed' or 'post'-social democratic alternative. Ironically, in recent years, this has increasingly come to be re-packaged for export as a modernised 'European social model', appropriate, where the European tradition of social democracy was not, to the new competitive environment summoned by an era of globalisation.

As this perhaps suggests, whether Labour is seen as a party with a social democratic past, a party with a social democratic present but not past, or a party that has never been nor is ever likely to become social democratic depends on one's definition of social democracy. Yet if it is accepted that Labour's origins do not reside in the continental European social democratic tradition, but in a rather more Anglo-

phone 'labourism' (as, for instance, in Drucker 1979; Minkin 1991), then whether New Labour represents a reclaiming, disavowal or betrayal of that tradition is not especially significant. For what it is worth, my own opinion is that it is wrong to see Labour as part of the European social democratic tradition; and at a time when the current Government claims to offer a 'renewed' social democratic model for European export, it may well be appropriate to say so.

A final consideration may serve as an important point of departure for the concluding section of this chapter. It is stated simply, though its implications, if taken seriously, are considerable. As political analysts and, perhaps especially, as political economists of Labour, we should be extremely careful not to confine ourselves only to holding opinions on matters in which we might present the Labour Party or movement as an obvious or significant agent. There is, understandably, a certain tendency in labour studies to restrict the analytical enterprise to the description of processes and the elucidation of causal mechanisms in which Labour and labour feature as prominent agents. The result may be a certain tendency to silence on the key question of the exogenous constraints invariably held to circumscribe the realm of feasible political agency for such actors. In an era of putative globalisation, in which the logic of non-negotiable external economic constraint is frequently invoked, self-declared political economists of Labour—labour cannot but afford to have an opinion on the empirical content of such claims. If that entails a temporary suspension of their analyses of Labour, until such time as they are better informed as to the nature of Britain's external economic exposure, then so be it.

Towards a post-disciplinary political analysis of Labour

The preceding section identified some of the principal substantive issues that any balanced assessment and evaluation of Labour's recent history must surely consider. The rest of the chapter moves from factors specific to the political analysis and political economy of Labour to those that are more general. To reiterate, the argument here echoes that of an earlier collaborative study of the post-war period, *Postwar British Politics in Perspective* (Marsh *et al.* 1999), and it is that the principal positions in debates which characterise labour studies today, like those on the periodisation of political development in post-war Britain, rest on generally unstated assumptions about a core set of basic analytical questions. Rendering these explicit should clarify the nature of the debate and the precise character of the specific positions adopted by the principal protagonists, thereby contributing to what otherwise threatens to become a dialogue of the deaf.

In making this argument, we should return to the four central issues introduced at the opening of the chapter, each of which serves to highlight a distinct aspect of the question of causality. Before considering each in turn, however, it is perhaps important to emphasise that what unites these issues in the new political science of British politics is a common emphasis on interconnectedness and what is sometimes termed 'complex interdependence'. Thus, the remainder of the chapter aims to trace the implications of such a condition of interdependence for the practice of political analysis – and of labour studies as an exercise in political analysis.

Interconnectedness and interdependence

It is tempting to argue, as many have, that the world we inhabit is more complex, interdependent and interconnected than ever before. Yet for present purposes what matters is not whether contemporary levels of interdependence are unprecedented historically but that we inhabit an interdependent world which must be analysed as such.

Alarming, conventional approaches to the social sciences, based on rigid disciplinary demarcations, do not prepare us well for a world of interdependence. Political scientists deal poorly with economic variables, just as economists deal poorly with political variables. Moreover, domestically focused analysts deal poorly with international dynamics, just as international analysts deal poorly with domestic dynamics. In a world of spatial and sectoral *independence*, these deficiencies do not amount to a problem. Yet that is *not* the world we inhabit. In short, in an interdependent world that does not respect spatial and sectoral divisions of analytical work such divisions will simply not suffice.

This is the challenge to which the new political science of British politics is a response, and it has important implications for labour studies. First, it points to the obvious occupational hazards of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries which are, arguably, present in a most acute way in labour studies. Stated most bluntly, in a world of (acknowledged) interdependence, discipline- or sub-discipline-specific approaches to social, political and economic analysis will tend to rely on assumptions – the validity of which they are incapable of adjudicating – generated by other disciplinary or sub-disciplinary specialisms. This is nowhere more clear than in the literature on the political economy of New Labour and the imperatives globalisation supposedly summons. Here the debate circles endlessly around, without ever closing in on, the nature and the degree of negotiability of the constraints that Britain's external economic interdependence is seen to imply. Opinions vary wildly. Yet what is almost entirely absent from such discussions is any attempt to describe empirically, let alone to evaluate, the precise nature of Britain's external economic relations – with respect to trade, finance and foreign direct investment. Indeed, in the vast majority of accounts, a crude, simplistic and never more than anecdotally empirical business-school or hyper-globalist orthodoxy is simply internalised and assumed to reflect the limits of our knowledge on such matters, with scant regard to the now substantial empirical evidence. That evidence, for what it is worth, shows if anything a consistent de-globalising of the British economy over the last forty years associated with the process – almost wholly absent from the existing debate – of European economic integration (Hay 2002c).

This is but one example. What it, and others like it, suggest is that, as political analysts and political economists of Labour, we simply cannot afford, if ever we could, to get by without a rather more thorough grasp of the cognate disciplines on whose assumptions we have increasingly come to rely. Yet it is not only the interdependence of different spatial scales to which the new political science draws attention. Increasingly central to its analytical concerns has been the interdependence of political conduct, political discourse and political context – in short, the

thorny perennials of structure and agency, the discursive and the material. It is to these that I now turn – drawing, for illustrative purposes, on the modernisation of the Labour Party and an argument first outlined in *The Political Economy of New Labour* (Hay 1999: chapter 1).

Structure and agency, context and conduct

The debate on the modernisation of the Labour Party provides yet further evidence of an academic truism: when engaged in abstract reflections of a theoretical kind, social scientists are keen to extol the virtues of a complex view of the relationship between actors and their context; yet, when it comes to more substantive concerns, the allure of actor-centred or context-centred positions often proves overwhelming. It is perhaps all too easy, then, to simply call for a more complex view of the relationship between structure and agency than that exhibited in much of the existing literature.

It is nonetheless important to contextualise political conduct, on the one hand, and consider the mechanisms by which political context is constantly shaped and re-shaped, on the other. To make such an appeal is not to imply that all previous accounts were guilty of one or other oversight: it would be fairer to suggest that they posit some relationship (however skewed or inconsistent) between conduct (for example, that of the party leadership) and context (say, that of the global political economy). It is, however, to emphasise the benefits of reflecting explicitly on the specific relationship between conduct and context; and to caution against the consequences of the structuralist and intentionalist positions to which many authors seem drawn. It is only by so doing that we can resist the tendency, characteristic of actor-centred accounts, to view Labour as being so radically unconstrained by its environment that pragmatic and contextual (as distinct from normative ethical) considerations simply did not enter into the equation when charting a course for the party's modernisation.

Similarly, it is only by so doing that we can resist the equally problematical tendency, characteristic of more context-centred positions, to imply such a rigidly delimited realm of political autonomy that the trajectory of the party's modernisation might almost be derived from a consideration of the environment in which it took place, independently of the actors involved. This latter view, it was earlier suggested, is closely associated with the uncritical acceptance of the 'hyper-globalist' thesis. Worse still, perhaps, is the vacillation between the two which allows New Labour to be presented, simultaneously, as the unwitting agent of the 'harsh economic realities' of the context in which it finds itself and yet as a principled exponent of a consistent, ethical, 'new' social democracy, freely chosen.

Such extremes are now thankfully rare. Indeed, even those approaches that tended to place their emphasis principally on structure–context or on agency–conduct have tended to do so without exclusively privileging the one over the other. Thus, for example, those analyses which sought to account for Labour's trajectory in recent years in terms of a strategic struggle for its soul (as reflected in the shifting balance of power within the party) have generally felt the need to introduce a range of contextual and structural factors – the balance of power itself

at any given moment in time, the strategic resources at the disposal of particular actors, the constitution and the institutionalised practices of the party, and so forth. Similarly, accounts privileging the (invariably) harsh economic realities of a newly globalised political economy have nonetheless had to invoke *some* conception of agency – if only as the immediate mechanism by which the party's commitments might be brought in line with a new external environment. It might seem tempting at this stage to suggest some middle ground, or even a potential *rapprochement*, between these contending structural and more agency-centred accounts. Yet we should be extremely wary of any suggestion that essentially interpretive disputes over the assessment of Labour's modernisation can simply be adjudicated by importing abstract considerations of structure and agency. Empirical disputes cannot be resolved by theoretical *fiat*. In the end, choices must be made – about what's going on (empirically) and about how what's going on should be accounted for in terms of structural and agential factors. The best that can be asked is that, having made such choices, analysts seek to defend and develop them in terms of a consistent and explicit view of the relationship between the actors involved and the context they inhabit.

Rhetoric and reality: the discursive and the material

Equally significant, though the subject currently of less theoretical reflection, is the question of the relationship between political discourse and the environment in which that discourse is formulated and, arguably, on whose development it impacts (though see Berman 1998; Blyth 1997; Campbell 1998). The significance of the ideational (the realm of ideas) can easily be traced from the question of structure and agency itself. For, if we accept that actors inhabit an environment external to them, it is no large step to suggest that their conduct is influenced by the ideas they formulate about that environment. What is more, as we know from (often painful) experience, no one-to-one correspondence can be assumed to obtain between the ideas we formulate about our surroundings (immediate or more distant) and those surroundings themselves. If we want to understand how actors behave, it is essential that we give due consideration to their understandings of the context in which they are situated and the means by which they formulate and revise such understandings.

Consider the 'class dealignment' thesis (Franklin 1985; Särilvik and Crewe 1983). During the 1980s, a number of prominent psephologists claimed to identify a secular trend in the relationship between social class and voting behaviour – it appeared that a smaller (and an ever-diminishing) proportion of the electorate was voting for its 'natural' class party. Critics claimed that this conception of absolute class voting did not explain, but merely re-described, Labour's predicament. Any shrinkage in the size of the vote of a party like Labour, they protested, would result in an absolute drop in class voting. All that could be concluded, then, from such a measure was that Labour was not doing very well. What was required, to adjudicate the claimed weakening of the relationship between class and voting behaviour, was a measure of relative class dealignment. Moreover, such a measure showed no such secular trend (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985).

The influence of the dealignment thesis, however, did not wane in response to such criticism – far from it. This presents a certain difficulty in assessing its validity in the light of more recent evidence. For, since the mid-1990s a decline in relative class voting has come to be observed. We are presented with a stark choice between two rather different explanations in accounting for this phenomenon. The first is simple, intuitive, entirely conventional and gives no consideration to ideational factors. It is that proponents of class dealignment were right all along and have merely been vindicated by events subsequent to their initial hypothesis (Sanders 2002). The second, a more discursive explanation, would point to the direct influence of the dealignment thesis (as a thesis) on Labour's strategic thinking. Labour, in the early 1990s, became convinced of the validity of the thesis (whatever the relative class voting figures may have suggested). Consequently, it ceased to make a class-based electoral appeal, re-projecting itself as a catch-all party studiously courting the median voter. On this alternative reading, any subsequent evidence of dealignment might then be taken less as evidence of the validity of the thesis than of its influence. Quite simply, if Labour behaved as if the thesis were true (by abandoning its class-based electoral appeal), the predictions of the thesis would be confirmed. Moreover, this would be the case whether or not working-class voters would be inclined to respond to a more genuinely class-based appeal, should one have been made.

On the basis of the evidence it is impossible to adjudicate finally between these two contending and mutually incompatible explanations – with very different implications for electoral strategy and the prospects for class-based appeals. Nevertheless, while it remains plausible that recent evidence of both absolute and relative class dealignment may be a consequence rather than a cause of Labour's modernisation, it would seem dangerously presumptuous to conclude that socio-economic change has consigned class-based electoral politics to psephological history.

Similar arguments may be made about the impact of globalisation – and ideas about globalisation – on New Labour's perceptions of the limits of political and economic feasibility (for a further elaboration of the argument, see Hay 2001). Has globalisation constrained the parameters of political autonomy or has Labour come to constrain itself on the basis of its perceptions of such constraints? Or, indeed, has Labour come, somewhat duplicitously perhaps, to legitimise otherwise unpalatable social and economic reforms with respect to globalisation's convenient logic of non-negotiable external economic constraint?

What these two examples serve to highlight is that, convenient though it may be to do so, we ignore the realm of political discourse at our peril. Most social scientists now seem happy to concede that we do indeed *make* history, though not in circumstances of our own choosing. Perhaps it is now also time to concede that, very often, we make our history in the image of the theories we construct about it or – as perhaps in the case of New Labour – in the image of the theories deemed most convenient to justify specific strategic goals.

Political, economic and cultural factors

Political analysts should not restrict themselves to narrowly political variables. Yet neither should they seek to incorporate each and every conceivable explanatory variable to produce a saturated model in which no variance is left unaccounted for. Parsimony, given the choice, is no bad thing. Thus, although it is important to argue for the significance of political, economic and cultural factors and, above all, the complex nature of the interaction between them, it is perhaps equally important to caution against a crudely 'additive' conception of theoretical sophistication. The political, the economic and the cultural are not independent arenas. Accordingly, we should be careful to avoid the implicit theoretical one-upmanship of the claim that politicism is one-dimensional, political-economic explanations are two-dimensional, and that only an integration of the political, the economic and the cultural can provide the 'complete' picture – a three-dimensional view (of a, presumably, three-dimensional reality).

That having been said, it is equally important to caution against the dangers of politicism and economism, and to suggest that they may be countered by a consideration of the political conditions of economic dynamics and the economic conditions of political dynamics. Politicism, in the literature on the renaissance and the subsequent history of the Labour Party, tends to be associated with the blithe optimism which comes with intentionalism and a benign neglect of the external (above all economic) environment. Politicist accounts thus tend to emphasise the inherent contingency of the modernisation process, often as a means to celebrate the considerable foresight, conviction and strategic *nôus* of the modernisers.

Economism is no less problematical. At its worst, it tends to view the political as either altogether irrelevant or as a pale shadow of immutable and inexorable economic processes (such as globalisation). Not only does this frequently imply that there is simply no alternative to the policies that have been pursued (a dangerous and, as already argued, seldom defended assertion), it also fails to acknowledge the political 'authoring' of processes such as economic integration. For, as a growing number of authors have demonstrated, contemporary processes of economic integration owe their origins to a series of highly political decisions – associated with the deregulation of financial markets, the liberalising of capital flows, and so forth (Helleiner 1995). Once this is acknowledged, the logic of inevitability, which patterns of economic interdependence are so frequently seen to imply, appear somewhat less imposing. This is made very clear in the technical literature on financial re-regulation – a literature sadly unnoticed by mainstream political science (see, for instance, Akyüz and Cornford 1995; Eichengreen, Tobin and Wyplosz 1995; Ul Haq, Kaul and Grunberg 1996; Watson 1999).

If we are serious about resisting tendencies to privilege either the actor or the context it is imperative that we also resist the narrow privileging of the economic and the political with which they have become so intimately connected.

The domestic, the international and the transnational

Finally, I return to the complex question of the relationship between the domestic, the international and the transnational. It is tempting, as in the preceding discussion, to argue that we need to consider each moment, and each moment in its articulation with every other moment. In one sense, though glib, that is true. However, as in the previous discussion, it will not suffice. For, ultimately, the relative weight we should assign to the domestic, the international and the transnational, is both an evaluative and an empirical matter. If we are interested in Labour's economic and industrial policy the international may be of greater significance than if our principal concern is with the prospects for a democratically elected second chamber to replace the House of Lords. No meta-theoretical invocation to balance the domestic and the international can then be posited.

Yet, if we are to reach an even-handed assessment of New Labour's modernisation or, indeed, of its conduct to date in office, it seems plausible to suggest that we can begin to do so only by locating the party in some kind of international and comparative context. If we are to move beyond the twin poles of economism and politicism it is important to acknowledge the domestic conditions of existence of international political and economic dynamics and the international conditions of existence of domestic political and economic dynamics. That is easy to write, somewhat more difficult to say, and altogether more difficult to deliver. Nonetheless, political analysts are seemingly rather more prepared, these days, to accept that this is the nature of the task at hand. That is no bad thing if we are to rectify the still-glaring disparity between what we know we ought to do and what, for the most part, we still continue to practise.

In this chapter the aim has been to establish the potential contribution to labour studies of an emerging 'new political science of British politics' that is more reflective about its core analytical assumptions. The argument is stated simply, though its implications, if accepted, are more involved. Positions on the question of structure and agency, the ideational and the material, and the relative significance of political, economic and cultural variables on the one hand, and domestic and international factors, on the other, are implicit in all political explanations. Labour studies is no exception. While there is no single 'correct' answer to any of these questions, it is important that we strive for a high degree of internal coherence. A condition of so doing is a far higher consciousness of and greater reflexivity towards such analytical assumptions. If this can be achieved labour studies will be far better placed to focus attention on the strategies most appropriate to study labour and Labour alike.

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