



The Labour Party and the New Left

The first New Left, Blue Labour and English modernity

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This essay is about the first New Left and Blue Labour. They are both examples of emergent currents of thinking and action at times of political hiatus on the left. In this hiatus what counts is not policy but the energy of emerging political moods and intellectual currents. They begin to re-orientate thinking and action, reconfiguring existing political fault-lines, and once more connecting people with political agency. Policy follows.

The first New Left and Blue Labour are different in their politics, but they share a common historical thread. They mark the beginning and the closing of a specific historical period. It begins with the changes in economy and society in the 1950s, the social liberal revolution of the 1960s, and the historical defeat of the left in the neo-liberal economic revolution of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. It closes in 2008 with the self-destruction of this economic revolution and the subsequent unfolding revelations of deceit and corrupt behaviour in political, civic and commercial life.

The first New Left began in 1956, 57 years ago. It emerged out of the decline of the post-war welfare consensus, and the rise of a new kind of consumer capitalism. Its key figures were Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. It lasted six years and after its demise they continued their work, creating a significant body of political and cultural thinking and philosophy.

Blue Labour emerged out of the self-destruction of the neo-liberal revolution and the search within the Labour Party for a viable political and economic alternative. It was conceived by Maurice Glasman in 2009 and was carried forward by a small group of politicians and academics. It had an extraordinary impact both within and outside the Labour Party, stimulating debate and often polarising opinion. In 2011 it crash landed. Those involved dusted themselves down and carried on.

What do these two intellectual movements tell us about the social and economic liberal revolutions in English society and politics over the last 57 years? And why does it matter to a Labour Party, which in 2010 suffered arguably its worst election defeat since 1918? These are the questions I address in this essay.





1956 and the first New Left

The first New Left emerged at a conjunction of historical trends. 1956 was the year of Krushchev's 'secret speech' and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, which broke the dominance of the Communist Party of Great Britain over a whole cohort of left-leaning intellectuals in Britain, and opened up the space for an independent, extra-parliamentary left. Edward Thompson and John Saville began publishing their cyclostyled journal, *The Reasoner*. Both were expelled from the Party, and in 1957 they launched *The New Reasoner*, one of the two journals associated with the first New Left.

1956 was the year of the post-imperial humiliation of Suez. The long Victorian age of Empire was drawing to a close. The Windrush generation of Caribbean migrants was a new presence, marking the beginning of a post-colonial and multicultural English society. The post-war years had seen the creation of a welfare state and a social democratic consensus. The consensus was the achievement of a long historical struggle by the counter-movement to laissez-faire capitalism, and it indicated an era drawing to a close. A period of sustained affluence was changing the culture and aspirations of the industrial working class. New forms of production and consumption were reconfiguring class relations. The cultural and social foundations of the labour movement were starting to erode. What next for the Labour Party?

In 1956 Anthony Crosland published an answer in his *The Future of Socialism*. He did so by partially dismissing the question. He said the post-war welfare settlement was permanent and capitalism had been transformed. 'Is this still capitalism?', he asked, and answered: 'No' (Crosland, 2006 [1956], 46). *The Future of Socialism* became the inspiration for future generations of Labour social democrats, but it also defined the limitations of this strand of Labour thinking, not only around political economy, but also culture.

Crosland signalled this warning in his final few pages on 'Liberty and gaiety in private life' and on 'Cultural and amenity planning'. He concluded by calling for a reaction against the austerity of the Fabian tradition through the pursuit of pleasure, beauty, personal freedom and enjoyment. It was almost an afterthought to his social democratic text and it was in this afterthought that the first New Left took root. The New Left was independent and democratic, radical in its critique of capitalism, and committed to the transformation of everyday cultural and social life. It rejected both orthodox communism and Fabianism.

The first New Left prefigured the rise of new class fractions created by the growth in higher education, the public sector, and a service economy. This new class fraction would burst onto the scene in the 1960s, rebelling against the older generation in a social liberal revolution in individuality and moral values. In 1957, Stuart Hall and others published the first issue of *The Universities and Left Review*. Its editorial confirmed the identity of the first New Left as an emergent politics, both in and against Labour: 'The age of orthodoxies has, once again, been outstripped by historical events ... The thaw is on: but the landscape is still littered with the remnants and ruins of the political ice-age' (Hall et al., 1957).

The first New Left was the inheritor of an English high cultural arc, described by Jed Esty in his insightful book, *Shrinking Island* (2003), which began in the early years of the twentieth century with the Bloomsbury set. This included: the literary modernism of Virginia Woolf, which questioned the capacity of traditional forms of narrative to depict contemporary life; post-impressionism and its project of representing the world of feelings and the symbolic; and the liberalism that infused English elite culture, but which was in political decline with the rise of the Labour-voting working class. These trends came together in the political economy of John Maynard Keynes, who understood that a shared set of national cultural values, even elite ones, is a strong defence against the ideology of laissez-faire.





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This high cultural arc of the inter-war years was a response to imperial decline, and a turn away from overseas and back to England. It was a response prevalent in the more traditional pastoralism of the Georgian poets and the English nationalism of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. The question, as T. S. Eliot put it in his poem *Little Gidding*, was how to portray human life in culture and society, 'Now and in England'. In 1932 it found a proselytiser in F. R. Leavis' *New Criticism* and the idea that 'Great Literature' promoted the possibilities of life. This English cultural renaissance and its literary canon was the inheritance of the post-war generation.

Culture as a resource

In 1957, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* attempted to turn this arc towards a democratic English working class culture. In 1958 Raymond Williams' essay 'Culture is ordinary' (Williams, 2001 [1958]) rejected the idea of culture as an elite aesthetic. Williams' anthropological approach to culture, as the practices and expression of life being lived, can be traced back through D. H. Lawrence, John Ruskin, and English romanticism to Samuel Coleridge and his idea of society and the 'cultivation of our humanity'.

It is a cultural tradition that shapes English modernity as both radical and conservative, and at odds with Enlightenment rationalism and the avant-garde of continental modernism. As much about moral sentiments and sensibility as it is about reason, it encompasses Edmund Burke as well as John Ruskin and William Morris. Morris' radical conservatism is a catalyst that brought together the literary first New Left and Edward Thompson's Marxist humanism in the historical recovery of the radical traditionalism of the English working class.

It is an English modernity of virtue, humanism, and democratic common culture. A modernity that is, in Williams' 1961 phrase, 'a long revolution' that 'requires new ways of thinking and feeling, new conceptions of relationships' (Williams, 1971 [1961], 13). But in this reworking of traditional English culture, Williams and Thompson in particular were not I think fully attuned to the disruptive power of the post-colonial conjuncture they found themselves in. During this period, they were not able to secure an internally coherent narrative of either their own project of modernity, or of England's national identity.

The first New Left's post-colonialism and internationalism revealed its paradoxical relationship to England. Stuart Hall describes his arrival at Oxford: 'Three months at Oxford persuaded me that it was not my home. I'm not English and I never will be. The life I have lived is one of partial displacement' (Hall, 2012). A life of partial displacement and cultural dislocation exemplifies the trajectory of the first New Left: Thompson's family past in India; the liminal class experience of the grammar school boys, Williams and Hoggart; Charles Taylor as a Canadian outsider. It believed in the value of popular culture and the idea of culture as ordinary, but it remained a critical outsider. The first New Left was a project of radical modernisation and the recovery of a democratic culture, but it couldn't be part of what it sought to make, and it did not belong to what it was attempting to recover.

The first New Left was both in and against Labour, and separate from mainstream politics. It spoke for the historical specificity of an emergent generational class fraction rather than a contested people. By the late 1960s it would be associated with the new counter cultures and a rejection of the virtues of class traditions and patrimony; an inter-generational conflict played out in countless families up and down the country. Partial displacement was also to become a domestic experience.





The second New Left

The first New Left lacked the theoretical resources to work through its indeterminacy. Thompson's humanism was not enough to explain the differentiations of culture and identity, nor to provide a convincing analysis of the complexity of historical change. It had on the one hand the inheritance of the Leavisite literary criticism it was trying to escape from, and on the other the crude Marxism it had rejected. Leavis, despite his faults, won out. Williams drew on the social anthropology of Ruth Benedict, and the social psychology of George Mead. J. K. Galbraith and C. Wright Mills were important influences. Charles Taylor initiated a communitarian engagement with Marx's theory of alienation in his 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' of 1844 (Taylor, 1958). But these theoretical resources could not secure a coherent historical, political project for the first New Left.

In 1960, *The New Reasoner* and *The Universities and Left Review* merged to form *New Left Review* with Stuart Hall as editor. The emphasis was on understanding the cultural and economic conjuncture. Within two years the editorship had passed to the young Perry Anderson. Together with the academic Tom Nairn, Anderson developed an analysis of England's modernity and its class relations which made a decisive theoretical break with the first New Left.

The byword of Anderson and Nairn is the certainty of their own historical analysis. English society is, in Nairn's words, not much more than an 'impenetrable blanket of complacency' (Nairn, 1964, 36). England's intellectual life is a 'comprehensive, coagulated conservatism ... for which England has justly won an international reputation' (Anderson, 1964, 40). Imperialism has left English modernity with an absent centre hollowed out by cultural philistinism and Benthamite utilitarianism. History, the future, intellectual rigour, an understanding of the totality of social relations, the historical political project: all lie across the Channel in continental Marxism and theory.

This transfer of intellectual allegiance detached the second New Left from common English culture. For Anderson, English political life is little more than a 'supine bourgeoisie' that has produced a 'subordinate proletariat' (Anderson, 1964, 43). The English working class, the virtue of everyday life, the search for practical forms of democracy, the art of muddling through, the value of the parochial: all are dismissed by the abstractions of structuralism and Marxist theory.

In 1968, Stuart Hall took over the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies from Richard Hoggart, and in a number of ground-breaking studies of society and culture developed the first New Left collective project within the academy. Under Hall's leadership, the threads of New Left thinking were woven into the emergent social movements around race, sexuality and gender, and had a decisive influence on *Marxism Today* in the 1980s and 1990s. But the growing influence of the 'linguistic turn' of continental theory – structuralism, post-structuralism, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault – widened the gap between New Left intellectuals and mainstream politics.

The turn was a reaction to the 'expressive humanism' of the first New Left. Its ideas of 'experience' and the individual as a unitary and internally undifferentiated subject were considered illusions. The conditions of one's existence could only be 'lived' 'through the categories, classifications and frameworks of culture' (Hall, 1981, 29). Meaning is not fixed, but continually slipping its cultural moorings through a play of difference in which nothing can be guaranteed. Hall took this interpretation of culture into his reworking of Gramsci's politics of hegemony and his ground-breaking analysis of Thatcherism.

Theories of difference and identity provided an intellectual dynamo for the social liberal revolution around race, sexuality, and gender relations. They teased apart the





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existing fabric of meaning in a similar way to the disembedding of social relations by the second, economic liberal revolution of capitalism that followed. Literary deconstruction and the universalist nature of Rawlsian political theory had the same impact. They disentangle the subject from material, cultural locatedness and meaningful relationships. Political agency and common action dissolve away into signifiers and abstraction. This highly rationalistic intellectual culture took hold in the universities and played no small part in shaping the thinking of a generation of the political elite.

Labour and the legacy of the New Left

There have been two consequences of the direction the New Left took following the ending of its first period. The first consequence is that its influence, particularly in its second form, did not translate beyond its original class and generational specificity into the broader population. Its disdain for English modernity and common culture distanced the intellectual left from the political contest in England around who defined the country. The contest was subsequently won by the New Right and Margaret Thatcher. In Birmingham, in June 1970, Enoch Powell declared the country under attack from an enemy within. 'Race' and immigration would play a major role in the new battle for Britain (Powell, 1971). For Powell, the enemy within was the liberal elite, which controlled the media and political establishment and which had abandoned England to immigration and to those who hated her.

It is Powell, not Thatcher, who is the political architect of the second, economic, liberal revolution. He laid claim to post-imperial England as a country betrayed. The Conservatives define the dominant English conservative imaginary. The left, pushed onto the back foot by populist resentment about immigration and the failure of Labour's economic modernisation, was increasingly drawn towards identity politics and cultural difference. 27 years later, when New Labour won the 1997 election, it still feared England as a reactionary country.

The second consequence is the fate of the Labour Party in the 1990s. The New Left was confined mostly to academics and intellectuals, who were not able to contest successfully the rising influence of the Third Way social democracy which accommodated itself to the second, economic liberal revolution. The Third Way mixture of social liberalism and economic liberalism led to a post-national cosmopolitanism which tended to valorise novelty, the global and change, over the ordinary, the local, and belonging. Like its academic cousin post-modernism, it had the effect of flattening out time, space and the hierarchy of values, helping to clear social and cultural impediments to commodification.

The first, social liberal revolution created a powerful trend towards a 'liberation ethic' of individual self-expression, anti-establishment sentiment, emotional attunement to the world, and the personal pursuit of pleasure. But these were also important resources for creating the new regimes of capital accumulation of the second, economic liberal revolution that followed in its wake. This second liberal revolution proceeded to restructure individual self-expression and desires around the deracinated economic rights and market freedoms of rational self-interest. What had begun as a politics of emancipation was appropriated into a culture of entitlement and winner-takes-all.

Blue Labour in One Nation

Over this period the political class ceded power and initiative to the market. Faced with a major systemic crisis the political class has sunk into inertia. The left fares no better. The crisis in capitalism has left it drifting in a state of political and cultural malaise. New





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Labour in government was defined by the two liberal revolutions of the period. In consequence, it is associated in the public mind with excess – excessive levels of private debt, too much micro-managing government, too much immigration, inflated house prices, too much welfare, and too much money spent for too little return. There is a popular loss of trust in the capacity of the political class to contain this excess and restore a virtuous order. The economic crisis reverberates with a sense of blame, dispossession, and social insecurity as people react to the erosion of the cultural meanings, fidelities, and solidarities that bind them together in society.

Blue Labour is a response to the social and economic costs of the two liberal revolutions and to the crisis of Labour's meaning and purpose in the wake of the failure of Third Way social democracy. Like the first New Left, it is an attempt to frame a specifically English modernity rooted in the radical and conservative traditions of common life. And like the first New Left it has arrived on the threshold of a new era of economic development, but one whose society has been damaged by too much uncontrolled change and marketisation. If the first New Left was intent on uprooting the confining social conventions and homogenous culture of the past, Blue Labour is intent on putting down social and cultural roots for a common good.

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