

# REVIEWS

## Liberal after all: Jon Cruddas comes full circle

Jon Cruddas, *A Century of Labour*, Polity 2024.

Jon Cruddas has been in a combative mood of late. Cruddas – over the past three decades variously trade union liaison to Tony Blair, figurehead of the Compassite internal opposition to Blairism, director of Ed Miliband’s policy review and founder of the now-avowedly-Starmerite ginger group Labour Together – reacted to the suspension of Neal Lawson’s Labour membership in the summer by charging the party leadership with ‘an attack’ on Labour’s ‘liberal and pluralist traditions’ (and worse).<sup>1</sup> Covering his new book, *The Guardian* focused on Cruddas’ suggestion that that the Labour leader is ‘detached from his own party’ and lacking clarity about ‘the purpose of a future Starmer government’.<sup>2</sup> Punchy stuff.

The most overt intellectual within Labour’s parliamentary ranks – and a consistently thoughtful, reflective politician – Cruddas’ politics have sometimes evaded precise definition. That makes him a beguiling figure in a world in which politicians are routinely accused of looking, sounding and thinking the same. Sunder Katwala neatly captured that paradoxical Cruddas mystique in this journal a decade ago:

... the ‘maverick’ ‘left-wing’ outsider who cut his teeth as a party staffer and as a Downing Street aide to Tony Blair; the critic of academic abstraction who holds a PhD in political sociology; a foundational defender of the party’s links with the unions who believes that Labour’s insular internal party culture risks suffocating its ability to be a living and breathing political movement, so making him at once the most plural of Labour’s tribalists and the most tribal of its pluralists; the egalitarian who believes that Labour must rediscover the conservative traditions of the British left; and the somewhat eurosceptical advocate of an authentic voice of English Labour, who draws on his deep sense of his own Irish Catholic roots.<sup>3</sup>

Now approaching the end of a twenty-three-year stint in Parliament, he has dedicated more time to elaborating on his ideas, with *A Century of Labour* following 2022’s *The Dignity of Labour*.

Here Cruddas offers an interpretation of the party's history through three competing conceptions of justice. One, utilitarian tradition, preoccupied with the maximisation of welfare, a current he identifies with cold, mechanistic tendencies within Labourist trade unionism, Fabianism, Labour's traditional right *and* hard left. Another, liberal-left current concerned with rights and freedoms, a crucial influence on Labour's post-1983 'modernisation'. Third, an Aristotelian virtue tradition which Cruddas finds in the Victorian 'religion of socialism', swiftly subsumed into 'electoral politics, finance and the building of the machines' but enduring in the ethical socialist tradition's formative influence on Clement Attlee and rehabilitation under Smith and the early Blair. Cruddas locates himself in this tradition too. 'Labour succeeds', he tells us, 'when it draws inspiration from all three competing traditions'.<sup>(11)</sup>

Which Cruddas do we get here? In at least one key respect, it is a new – or rather, an old – Cruddas. For those accustomed to thinking of Cruddas as the parliamentary figurehead of Blue Labour (much to his discomfort), it might come as a surprise. The anguished debates of the 2010s about immigration, identity and nationhood are consigned to the margins. Instead, we have a politician recognisably in the mainstream of Labour's soft left (no bad thing!); a fact perhaps illustrated by cover endorsements from Lisa Nandy and Neal Lawson. Despite Cruddas' avowal of the 'virtue' tradition, the reader may be struck by the extent of his liberal sympathies. (Perhaps Cruddas is doing exactly what he calls on us all to do: drawing on differing conceptions of 'justice' according to circumstance). Here we have a pluralist who longs for Labour to bridge its warring traditions, dismayed at the tendency of left and right alike to retreat into statist policies and machine politics. He is anxious above all that the party's liberal tradition – the impetus towards constitutional reform and equalities legislation – has been sidelined. In this sense, it feels we have come full circle: the darling of Brown-era Compass conferences, reborn. The author is perhaps happier in his own skin for it.

The recurring tragedy of Labour, in Cruddas' telling, goes something like this. A leader, fired with moral mission and the politics of virtue, successfully fuses the best of the liberal and utilitarian traditions. This brings electoral success and progressive change. But under the pressure of events, political forces and Labour's baser instincts, the party abandons the moral and intellectual high road. The usual failings ensue: first, reformist zeal and innovation yield to governing orthodoxy and transactional politics; then defeat, bitter recriminations, and a politics centred on control of the party apparatus and the central state. Ethical undercurrents bubble below the surface, neglected. Beneath the specific philosophical framework, this is a familiar story of the rises, falls, civil wars and renewals that form the chapters in orthodox Labour history – albeit, in Cruddas' hands, it is all imbued with an imminent quality.

Whereas *Dignity* focused more narrowly on the politics of work, *Century*'s focus is broader – and herein lies the rub. Cruddas has always been a fascinating interpreter of Labour's history, but here is at times a rather prosaic narrator of it. When the narrative catches up with more recent events, the analysis feels fresh and pertinent, but you long for Cruddas the commentator to become Cruddas the active participant. The Blair years, the Miliband era engagement with 'Blue' and 'One Nation' Labour, the role of Labour Together – all come and go, all receive critical treatment, and yet the figure of Jon Cruddas is strangely absent. Let's hope he's saving it for the memoir.

The book sparks to life when we arrive at moments of intellectual ferment, particularly in the long post-1951 and post-1979 periods in opposition. Here is Cruddas at his most recognisable, excavating the wreckage of Labour's past failures to rescue from the condescension of posterity, the cast-offs and Cassandras who pointed to heroic roads not taken. Labour's history here is always tragic, but rich in traditions which, if pulled from the wreckage, reassembled with artistry and reapplied to new times, might offer redemption.

In these passages, Cruddas returns to what he does best: interpretive intellectual biography, in a distinctly Marquandian tradition, of Labour giants past. Michael Foot and Tony Benn receive partial, somewhat ambivalent rehabilitations; flawed figures in touch with a romantic, English ethical socialism, but tethered to a (self-) destructive utilitarianism through factional loyalties (144-7). A four-stage intellectual pen portrait of the career of Gordon Brown is similarly compelling (181-2).

His analysis of Starmerism too is more nuanced than newspaper coverage might allow. He perceives not hyper-caution but audacity in Labour's strategy: a 'challenge [to] political orthodoxy', not to 'accept the Brahmin left was the new base of progressive politics' but to reforge Labour's connection with its traditional class base. It is in these terms that Cruddas analyses what he sees as a renovation of Kinnockite 'supply-side socialism' and a shift *away* from social and constitutional liberalism (232-4). I don't think all of this is right – giving too much credence to the party's relationship with its own history and not enough to the transnational economic and cultural drivers of political change – but it is perceptive, important, and treats the Starmer project seriously.

There is a deeper question here, one that cuts to the heart of Cruddas' personal political project: the problem of ethical socialism. The Labour Church is a fascinating and still understudied phenomenon: an eccentric but powerful mass movement, its strength derived from *feeling* more than political thought.<sup>4</sup> But if we approach this as a tradition with more contemporary relevance, don't we risk placing rather too much weight on, say, the young Clement Attlee's political associations compared to the programmes and actions of his government decades later? Do the expressions of the 'virtue' tradition described here add up to much

more than rhetoric or quirks of personal biography? I finished the book unconvinced. Political traditions concerned with material equality, democratic freedoms and the use of state power have proven durable because they still correlate to extant social demands. Is the same true of a tradition that derives from the nineteenth-century crisis of faith? To reconnect with that ideal means grappling not just with inherited party traditions but with decades-old processes of secularisation, cultural pluralism, and the hollowing out of mass political parties.

It is worth dwelling on the Blair case. That the early Blair, via engagement with an assortment of Christian socialists and ‘new communitarians’, reconnected to Labour’s ‘ethical’ roots, is a recurring preoccupation of Cruddas’. Certainly, Blair marshalled the language of ethical socialism to great effect. But that, in my reading, is the limit of it: it was the effective use of language, an artful rhetorical move (this is not a question of *sincerity* per se). A discourse of community, of ‘social-ism’ – counterposed not to capitalist economics but to individualist ethics – allowed New Labour’s founders to position ‘modernisation’ as an act of restoration rather than historic rupture. Blair could argue he had discarded outdated means in pursuit of timeless ends, and reclaimed Labour from historically deviant strains of scientific Marxism.<sup>5</sup> It allowed Blair to anchor tough policies on anti-social behaviour or welfare in a language of socialist tradition; equally, to present traditional social-democratic concerns as novel and hard-edged.<sup>6</sup> In this interpretation, Blair wasn’t an inheritor of a sanctified ‘tradition’ but a talented politician making use of the discursive resources available to secure internal legitimacy for an electoral project.

What politicians say matters, in ways they themselves often don’t appreciate. But a political project can’t escape reliance on ugly, utilitarian devices like plans, targets and spending reviews, effected through a machinery of government. The traditional tools of social democracy have even, I would argue, proven quite effective at fostering community.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps welfarist politics is imbued with the very virtue Cruddas discusses, albeit in a context never entirely of a political actor’s own making. A politics conducted in the language of virtue and community can be a powerful corrective to a narrowly economic or statist politics prone to detachment. But – painful as it is for the historian to admit – there are limits to what age-old traditions can offer us in navigating the world of today.

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## Notes

- 1 Katie Neame, ‘Cruddas slams Labour “Leninists” and claims party less liberal than Blair’s’: <https://labourlist.org/2023/07/factionalism-labour-jon-cruddas-neal-lawson/>, 19 July 2023.

- 2 Toby Helm, 'Keir Starmer lacks "clear sense of purpose" says Labour ex-policy chief', *The Observer*, 30 December 2023.
- 3 Sunder Katwala, 'The identity crisis of Jon Cruddas', *Renewal*, Vol 20, No 2-3, 2012 pp11-20.
- 4 For a rare, recent study, see: Jacqui Church, *The Labour Church: Politics and Religion in Britain 1890-1914*, Bloomsbury, London 2014.
- 5 Tony Blair, 'Introduction', in Giles Radice (ed.), *What Needs to Change*, HarperCollins, London 1996.
- 6 See Nick Garland, 'Social democracy, the decline of community and community politics in post-war Britain', in Nathan Yeowell (ed.), *Rethinking Labour's Past*, Bloomsbury, London 2022, pp137-157.
- 7 See for instance: Andrew Seaton, *Our NHS: A History of Britain's Best-loved Institution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2023.

# Morbid symptoms? Centre-left failure and neoliberal resilience in an age of austerity

Sean McDaniel, *Divided They Fell: Crisis and the Collapse of Europe's Centre-left*, Agenda Publishing 2023.

Björn Bremer, *Austerity from the Left: Social Democratic Parties in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, Oxford University Press 2023.

Magnus Ryner, in 2010, asked why European social democracy was not revived by the 2008 financial crisis. His answer, relevant to this review, was that the crisis of finance and welfare in the 1990s and 2000s was

above all a crisis of the social democratic Third Way. In other words, modern European social democracy is so deeply imbricated with the system that is in crisis that it is in no position to offer an alternative to it.<sup>1</sup>

It has been a contention of multiple scholars that the stark decline of European social democracy has been one of its own making. *Divided They Fell* (by Sean McDaniel) and *Austerity From the Left* (by Björn Bremer) place this contention beyond doubt. At the same time, and in part thanks to both authors' excellent promotion of the causal power of ideas, one cannot help but draw the parallel conclusion of the success of neoliberalism as a hegemonic project within the structures of finance-led capitalism. It has become somewhat cliché to trot out Gramsci's famous 1930 line, that 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, when considering the legacy and the fate of the European centre-left, the cliché undoubtedly holds.

That these books have been published in the same period is fortuitous for those who want to understand the challenges faced by social democracy and the lessons to be learnt. Both drawing similar conclusions, the complementarity of their theoretical and methodological approaches, alongside their differing case selection, reinforces each other's claims. Across both, the reader will find a forensic treatment of the three biggest players in European social democracy, the Labour Party (both), Le Parti Socialiste (PS) (McDaniel) and the Sozialdemokratische Partei

Deutschlands (SPD) (Bremer). McDaniel and Bremer both situate themselves in a current of literature that seeks to situate the specifics of national social democratic politics within a broader European and global context. Both trace and highlight the decline of social democratic politics as a critical movement, stunted as they were by their association with austerity politics, but more so their inability (or, in some cases, perhaps refusal) to counter narratives and discourses that quickly became hegemonic in the absence of staunch opposition. Austerity, as Mark Blyth has argued, is a dangerous idea. Both authors acknowledge the necessity of taking ideas seriously; the financial crisis and the political choice of pursuing austerity is an especially powerful case study.

Yet, as the authors take great care to discuss, such choices are not made in isolation. All the parties studied faced not only the need to respond decisively to an exogenous shock, but to do so while considering electoral prospects, public opinion, and internal ideational and political struggles. Many of these involved constraints linked to the path dependence of social democracy since the crises of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and especially the path-breaking/-making moment of the Third Way, which completed social democracy's turn away from traditional Keynesianism and ushered in a more fraught relationship with, and navigation of, monetary, fiscal and social policy. This is a crucial constraint in both accounts, given that 'economic policies are also influenced by the ideas that parties hold about how the economy works. This is particularly true during economic crises, when ideas provide explanations of what has gone wrong and how to fix it'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the assumptions made by Third Way social democratic parties, accepting the premises and ostensible inevitability of financialised capitalism, severely restricted decision-making, based on which ideas were salient and which political programmes were seen as both materially possible and electorally expedient.

McDaniel and Bremer have both combed through significant amounts of data to substantiate their claims. The former provides testimony and analysis of 33 elite (and expert) interviews with important figures within British and French social democracy, alongside over 300 English and French core documents, including manifestoes, speeches, and internal party strategy documents. This provides an unprecedented insight into the internal decision-making processes of Labour and PS, alongside how these decisions were then communicated to the public.

Bremer provides the reader with a different yet equally relevant body of data involving surveys and experimental treatment of public attitudes towards fiscal policy, 'explaining outcome' process tracing, original data measuring party positions and mass media representations of them, and analysis of Eurobarometer data. The book clearly and deftly takes the reader through analysis and discussion of the wider European political and economic context and the relationship between

party positions and public attitudes to help explain social democracy's uneasy yet ultimately strong relationship with austerity policy.

Both authors agree that centre-left parties' acceptance of (or perhaps acquiescence to) austerity politics was not a foregone conclusion; both sets of data and analysis demonstrate however that it was overwhelmingly the most likely outcome. An outcome that ultimately was lent legitimacy by social democracy's acquiescence, embedding it as the new orthodoxy – despite challenges from the left both within and outside of the major centre-left parties. Nevertheless, the arguments of the two books bring to mind the Owl of Minerva. For all the contemporary pronouncements that austerity was not the only option, or was a mistake, the combination of internal and external political and economic pressures presented austerity as – and ensured it was – a *fait accompli*.

It is understandable, then, to argue that the demise of social democracy was at the hands of social democrats themselves. Social democracy across Europe is still historically weak, despite some potential stories of success and/or survival in the UK and perhaps Germany. These books provide a compelling account of this demise. While Bremer focuses on supply and demand-side politics, McDaniel offers a compelling narrative of social democracy's struggle with (rather than *against*, I would argue) neoliberalism. For me, these books deepen the contention that rather than seeing the death of neoliberalism in recent years, as an ideological system it remains remarkably resilient – hegemonic, even. In its heyday, its main competitor was forced to conform to neoliberal political and moral norms, rendering its critique toothless. Social democracy has found itself in the awkward position of trying to argue against and perhaps break down the very scaffolding it helped create and – thanks to the long-term erosion of welfare architectures, and their replacement with social investment, which is highly compatible with neoliberalism and finance-led accumulation<sup>4</sup> – is now reliant on to deliver the social policies and programmes its constituencies so desperately need.

Yet, might there be hope? If the slogan at the height of neoliberalism, the Third Way, and even the financial crisis was 'there is no alternative', the Covid pandemic, for a short time at least, demonstrated this did not have to be the case. The jettisoning of fiscal orthodoxy, even temporarily, and pivoting to massive spending is a testament to the power of ideas. Unlike the financial crisis, the Covid pandemic was a crisis in which blame did not have to be levelled inwardly.<sup>5</sup> When enough actors agreed, the veil of objectivity fell from the economic orthodoxy of cost containment. The pandemic forced focus away from growth while economies were shut down, on to the social, for which there was clear – if temporary – consensus. Yet, in the post-pandemic years, we again see the hegemonic strength of broad neoliberal thought as we return to cost containment and narratives of balancing the books.



In an era of overlapping crises of varying magnitude, the centre-left faces an uphill struggle. The most pressing crises of our age, like the climate crisis, present an opportunity for social democrats to regain a position of dominance and, if with fortuitous political and economic conditions, reshape the (welfare) state. Yet to do so, the centre-left must decouple itself from the pursuit of unlimited growth above all else through finance-led accumulation. As McDaniel emphasises, however, '[w]hile Labour and PS have embarked upon a new era of more expansive government intervention, are placing a greater focus on labour market conditions and pay and are taking the climate crisis more seriously than ever, there are lingering reputational, ideational and strategic issues that will shape their approaches'.<sup>6</sup> Any desire for transformative change will inevitably be tempered by electoral ambitions and the short-termism associated with them. Ironically, then, this may mean pursuing paradigm change, so that transformative change and electoral goals can better line up. Bremer's analysis reinforces the point that the centre-left must be brave in thinking longer-term: 'social democrats lose support when they adopt austerity [...] political competition cannot be limited to valence issues because politics is more than the technocratic management of the economy'.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most important combined takeaway from both books is that 'social democratic parties actually had more leeway to develop alternative fiscal policies than they realised'.<sup>8</sup> That this opportunity was not seen, or – worse – was seen and not taken, is explained in both texts as a result of the combination of material and ideational factors, severely constraining social democratic parties' ability to take the initiative during and after the global financial crisis, ceding too much ground to the economic right, and further alienating their bases. While the current electoral prospects of the Labour party in the UK look promising, the party seems to be leaning back into Third Way thinking while capitalising on the Tories' disarray. In continental Europe, PS looks to be a spent force in France, while the SPD continues to struggle in Germany.

These two books should be essential reading for both scholars and political strategists. Those who want a strong and transformative social democratic movement would do well to heed the age-old implication of these books' arguments – learn from history, or be doomed to repeat it.

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## Notes

- 1 Ryner, M., 'An obituary for the Third Way: the financial crisis and social democracy in Europe. *Political Quarterly* 81, 4, 2010, p555.

- 2 Gramsci, A., *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, New York, International Publishers, p276.
- 3 Bremer, B., *Austerity From the Left: Social Democratic Parties in the Shadow Of The Great Recession*. Oxford, OUP, p10.
- 4 Laruffa, F., 'Studying the relationship between social policy promotion and neoliberalism: the case of social investment', *New Political Economy* 27, 3, 2022, pp473-489; Donoghue, M., 'Resilience, discipline and financialisation in the UK's liberal welfare state', *New Political Economy*, 27,3, 2022, pp504-516.
- 5 Donoghue, M., 'The UK in search of a new imagined community? Social cohesion, boundary building and social policy in crisis periods', in Boerner, S., Seeleib-Kasier, M. (eds.), *European Social Democracy and the Covid-19 Pandemic*, New York, OUP.
- 6 McDaniel, S. *Divided They Fell: Crisis and the Collapse of Europe's Centre-left*. Newcastle, Agenda, p146.
- 7 Bremer, *Austerity From the Left*, pp226-7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p230.