

Shrinking horizons: Starmerism and the politics of nothing

Will Leggett

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coherent set of values

Introduction

Doomed to fail? The rapid unravelling of Starmerism

In situating Keir Starmer's Labour government it is more difficult than usual to get past the noise of the immediate political scene. The 2024 general election provided the jarring experience of a 'loveless landslide': a huge Labour majority delivered by a Conservative implosion and the distortions of first-past-the post voting. The win was based on a historically small vote share, without deeper public support or optimism for a cautious Labour manifesto. The election quickly gave way to the now familiar national and global turbulence, including serious social unrest in the UK in summer 2024, an autumn election of epochal importance in the US, and heightening geopolitical conflict and economic instability. But even allowing for this unenviable operating environment, the paralysis, lack of direction and sheer political incompetence of the Starmer administration has taken both adversaries and sympathisers by surprise. This - and the continued dominance of political discourse by the populist right - has been the context for the surge of the Reform Party, amidst further Conservative Party collapse. The question of how Labour responds to its own

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unpopularity and the threat of Reform has brought simmering strategic issues - what is Starmer's Labour for? - to a crescendo. Starmer has doubled down on authoritarian rhetoric in an apparent attempt to fight on Reform's terrain: his comments about Britain being 'an island of strangers' were likened to the speeches of Enoch Powell. This - as well as the government's dithering reluctance to address widespread disquiet over benefit cuts - was the final straw for many progressives.¹

Much commentary revolves around key personalities, internal ideological factions and comparisons with previous Labour governments, especially New Labour from 1997 to 2010. In particular, the argument that the Starmer government's actions are straightforwardly consistent with the victory and hubris of a longstanding right-wing Labour faction is persuasive.² In this article I want to situate Starmerism in the context of a different type of problem: the increasing inability of political projects - and perhaps especially progressive ones - to offer a sociological account of how the world is changing, and an ideological framework that indicates how they will shape it. These elements are crucial for a project (of any stripe) to build and appeal to social constituencies and coalitions, align itself with key social transformations, and tell a story about how it relates to them. Together these provide the context for a future vision - the lack of which has been a consistent criticism of Starmerism.³

What would Gramsci (and Stuart Hall) do?

In offering this account I draw on the tradition - familiar to readers of this journal - associated with Antonio Gramsci since the early twentieth century, and later applied to analysing Labour by Stuart Hall and others.⁴ Gramsci offers a toolkit for understanding political projects in terms of the interplay between deep-historical economic, social and cultural forces; political values and ideology; and the more immediate level of political tactics, decision and intervention. For Gramsci, the art of politics lies in a hard-headed assessment of the key drivers and implications of social and economic change; the balance of social power and forces within this; and the types of identities and demands that are in the process of being made. Hegemonic politics involves successfully linking one's political objectives and values to these components, to steer real but indeterminate social forces in a political direction. At its most expansive, hegemony means stabilising and integrating these dynamic elements to the extent that much of society *imagines itself* in a way consistent

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with the political vision.⁵ Historical British examples include the post-war welfare settlement ushered in by the Attlee administration, the Thatcher revolution of 1979 onwards and - despite the reluctance of much of the left to recognise it - the Third Way, New Labour project from 1997 to 2010. There is growing recognition that, beyond its chaotic disruption, right-wing populism (especially MAGA Republicanism) needs to be taken more seriously on these terms, given its success in shifting attitudes in line with its long-term strategic and ideological objectives.⁶

What follows uses this Gramscian lens and argues that Starmerism - somewhat remarkably - lacks *both* sociological insight *and* a clear and coherent set of values. The result is an absence of the key ingredients for a hegemonic - or any - type of governing or transformative project: a politics of nothing. In contrast to commentary which dismisses the contemporary relevance of New Labour, key comparisons will be made with it. This is not to endorse the political character of New Labour, Blairism and the Third Way as they played out in practice. But New Labour remains instructive as the ideological formation (led from the centre and right of the party) that Starmerism is most typically held up against, and as an exemplar of a British hegemonic project.⁷ For this purpose, the key distinction between Blairism and Starmerism is not over this or that policy or personality, but the analytical and ideological resources that were available to the former and, at its most effective, the skill with which they were deployed in a *form* of politics that had a hegemonic character.

We begin by revisiting the self-styled 'New Times' analysis of rapid social change that contributed to the emergence of New Labour from the early 1990s, and then the Third Way theory that came to intellectually dominate the project. The intention is not to relitigate debates over the Third Way's political content but, again, to see it as exemplifying a form of centre-left politics that explicitly engaged social and economic transformations, and the status of political values in relation to them. We then consider some key elements of Starmerism which indicate the disappearance of both values and social analysis from Labour discourse. In the resulting void has emerged a *transactional*, reactive politics with no narrative to make sense of the transactions themselves, and thus a sense of stasis and disillusionment. The conclusion looks ahead, and explores what political resources may be at hand for the development of a project based on popular, social-democratic themes. But this is followed by a fundamental note of caution: it may be that the extent

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of contemporary social dissolution and polarisation have rendered the social-democratic repertoire increasingly obsolete.

New Labour as (unlikely) hegemonic project

The old 'New Times'

The contemporary conjuncture is typically characterised in terms of rapid social change, crises, and their dislocating political effects.⁸ Amidst this it is easy to lose sight of how earlier periods were similarly interpreted. A key reference point for the British left in engaging with ideas about social transformation was the 'New Times' analysis dating from the late 1980s.⁹ This was associated with the journal *Marxism Today*, which had been challenging orthodox Marxist tenets through a wide-ranging account of increasingly global transformations and their complex interplay with the emerging hegemony of neoliberalism. Looking back, the contributions to this debate did indeed capture what became key themes in social and political analysis over the next two decades.¹⁰ At their heart were the social, cultural and political consequences of an increasingly globalised, post-Fordist regime of production. These included the disruptive effects of new (at that time pre-internet) information and communications technologies (ICTs); the flexibilisation and fragmentation of employment; and mass consumerism and its effects on identity formation and political behaviour. Relatedly, there was a focus on the rise of new social movements and associated questions of identity and the environment, and their implications for more traditional conceptions of class, the state, collectivism and mass political parties.

The New Times analysis informed the rise of New Labour and remains relevant to the still more complex challenges faced by progressives today. A key division emerged as to how to read the political character and potential of the processes identified. Stuart Hall - in keeping with his seminal analysis of Thatcherism and the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) - argued that the transformations identified by New Times constituted the terrain upon which hegemonic politics would be fought but not determined. This meant that the left needed to recognise new and visible realities such as consumer culture and its grip on individual identities. But the political task was to align this with progressive values and new constituencies and coalitions: the world was changing but its political character remained open-ended. For Hall and others, the hegemonic

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intent of Thatcherism lay in the way it was practising precisely this view of politics, but in the service of a deep neoliberal societal restructuring.¹¹ A classic example was the cheap sale of council housing: this restructured the political economy of housing through privatisation, while speaking to the ownership aspirations of working-class tenants and co-opting them to the Thatcherite worldview.

Hall's account recognised the deep social context of politics but sought the opportunities for political actors to steer social change - and associated political identities - towards a more pluralist and egalitarian democratic socialist vision. With Labour's own project of 'modernisation' gaining momentum at the time, it is easy to see why this *mode* of theorising was of interest to key party figures. However, it was a different reading of the world depicted by New Times that gained greater traction, and the significance of this only became apparent as the New Labour project evolved.¹² On the dominant New Labour reading - echoing the 'there is no alternative' language of Mrs Thatcher - centre-left parties had no choice but to fall into line with new economic and social realities. This meant jettisoning now 'outdated' political values, notably greater equality, which in Hall's Gramscian view were crucial for redirecting change. Political identities were seen as fixed by overpowering economic and social forces: all the centre left could do was pragmatically adapt to them.

The Third Way - 'traditional values in a modern setting'

In the historical memory of much of the contemporary left, New Labour is regarded as having been merely an accommodation to - or extension of - neoliberalism, supplemented with neo-conservative foreign policy. Despite this, and however its political character is judged, it is also the case that New Labour was seriously engaged with both analysing social change and exploring how to revive social-democratic values in this context. In this sense it was generating the intellectual resources for the *type* of politics favoured by Hall and the Gramscians, even if it lacked the political will to invest it with content that would challenge concentrations of wealth and power. The key body of work here is the Third Way, explicitly articulated by Blair and elaborated by British sociologist (now Lord) Anthony Giddens.¹³ Despite his different political and intellectual orientation, and criticisms from analysts such as Hall, it is interesting that Giddens claimed, 'The objective of third way politics ... is to carry through the political implications of New

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Times'.¹⁴ In an earlier book, *Beyond Left and Right*, Giddens had described the 'social revolutions of our time'. Here he paid particular attention to the far-reaching consequences of cultural globalisation in ways that (allied with the work of other theorists of late modernity such as Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck) still provide resources for thinking the present conjuncture. Notably this included an account of the generation of uncertainty in the face of information proliferation ('manufactured uncertainty'); the ways in which this accelerated the undermining of anchoring social reference points and practices across social life (de-traditionalisation); and accompanying widespread individualisation (in e.g. personal relationships, belief systems, cultural consumption).¹⁵

As the Third Way developed, this type of sociological analysis occurred alongside recognition of the importance of political values - the second part of our Gramscian equation - and debate within Labour over their form. Blair initially dabbled with communitarianism (seeking to locate the modern individual in a community context) and sketched out community as one of his Third Way values alongside equal worth, opportunity for all and responsibility.¹⁶ Giddens, for his part, argued for the updating of values and policy in the face of economic and social transformation. His reading of the labour market and the public sphere led to him reframe inequality in terms of inclusion and exclusion (incorporating a challenge to the 'voluntary exclusion' of elites).¹⁷ Additionally, his analysis of individualisation and a new 'life politics' (focused on identity and wellbeing) led to arguments in favour of 'positive welfare': this would support individual choice and autonomy over a complex life course, as well as demanding responsibility.¹⁸

Ultimately both Giddens and Blair were dismissed by the left for treating the neoliberal global economic settlement as being immovable, while Blair in particular read its implications in a culturally conservative way.¹⁹ Blair's thinking and practice became dogmatically centred on the inevitability of unregulated finance capitalism, and technological development as envisaged by (what we now call) Big Tech.²⁰ It also gave primacy to a neoliberal version of individual choice, reflected in public service reform on consumerist lines, and punitive approaches to those who fell outside of these parameters. Such conservatism was a thinly guarded appeal to the perceived prejudices of a 'Middle England' electoral demographic. However, this always sat uneasily with the figure of the global cosmopolitan that Third Way sociology depicted, and to which New Labour appealed when addressing its

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professional, liberal and urban audiences.²¹ Similar tensions continue to play out in Starmerism: strategists struggle to retain liberal, predominantly urban graduates, while shifting from centring Middle England to a still more aggressively culturally conservative imaginary of 'Red Wall' working-class voters.²²

Giddens sought to re-locate the Third Way project more explicitly in the social-democratic tradition, but like Blair he remained wedded to a reductive, 'there is no alternative' reading of economic and cultural globalisation.²³ Today, in an epic rebuttal, it is the new populist right who are demonstrating that this apparently immutable global configuration was, it turns out, eminently contingent, alterable and reversible. This has come in the form of tariffs and protectionism; fiscal irresponsibility; threatening or dismantling global multilateralism; and rejecting the figure of the global cosmopolitan in favour of outright ethnic nativism. All of this would not just have been undesirable to Third Wayers but - far more damning in their worldview - *unrealistic*.

Despite the limitations of their analysis and project, and in contrast to the paralysis and reactive character of the contemporary centre left, Third Wayers were able to achieve a sustained period of political dominance with significant policy legacies. They echoed the form of the New Times analysis by perceiving fundamental social transformations and identifying a set of values that might intervene in them. However, rather than knitting the sociological and value wings together, they ended up with reductive readings of social change that foreclosed structural reform, while offering hectoring and culturally conservative values for narrow psephological purposes. My own position was that this *mode* of politics was nevertheless recoverable for more progressive ends.²⁴ By contrast, the (potentially) fatal weakness in the Starmer project is that it lacks both a Third Way type sociological analysis *and* any kind of coherent value framework, such that the raw materials for a more progressive strategy - or indeed any kind of strategy - are absent.

Starmerism: death by a thousand transactions

The world confronted by Starmer's Labour and centre-left parties globally is of course radically different from that of the mid-1990s and 2000s, involving accelerated societal complexity and multiple crises.²⁵ A key feature of this is a further collapse of faith in stable, shared values and political institutions, making the type of strategic method advocated here - sociological analysis plus value mobilisation

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- especially challenging. But challenging is not the same as impossible, and the populist right (as well as occasional left alternatives) have found ways to forge coalitions, compelling visions and programmes. Here I highlight how the discursive elements of Starmerism indicate a lack of sociological insight, values agenda or overarching strategy. This lack reflects - and intensifies - a narrowly transactional approach to politics, which is at the heart of the government's current unpopularity and offers no platform for a transformative project.

No change there, then

While the empty signifier of 'change' was central to Labour's 2024 election campaign, a more specific piece of sloganeering signalled an unwillingness to contemplate a transformative project: following '14 years of Tory chaos', 'stability is change'.²⁶ On one level this was skilful rhetoric. The Conservatives' more recent descent into political chaos was foregrounded, along with the deeper and more sustained period of societal 'chaos' which they had presided over. Notwithstanding its Orwellian doublespeak, 'Stability is change' neatly reinforced this image, while presenting Labour as a return to 'grown up' (for which read 'centrist') governance. This also laid the ground for portraying Starmer in classic technocratic fashion, more so even than Blair: as an avowedly non-ideological 'Mr Rules' who is purely focused on delivery and outcomes.²⁷ But the latent and more substantial function of 'stability is change' was an answer - or even rebuke - to the many social constituencies demanding deeper political, economic and societal change. The political offer was restoration of a sense of stability. There was no future vision - articulated through values - that could tap into the aspirations of social groups, or any account of the social and economic dynamics that might be harnessed to realise them.²⁸

In government, Labour's presentation of its key themes of 'growth' and 'security' has been consistent with the groundwork laid by the 'stability is change' motif. Both security and growth in fact have a credible social-democratic pedigree, and are not always linked solely to the notion of a better managed status quo. Giddens, for example, invoked both themes in his *Progressive Manifesto* of 2003, and as Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves elaborated a 'securonomics' in her Mais Lecture over twenty years later - perhaps the most substantive gesture towards a political philosophy for the Starmer project to date.²⁹ However growth - heralded as the government's overarching mission - has not only failed to mobilise support or to

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materialise, but has become a focal point for Starmerism's aimlessness.

It remains a key tenet of political culture that economic growth is inherently desirable. Despite public awareness of the climate crisis and support for Net Zero, articulating these concerns with a critique of endless economic growth has been beyond the reach (or mindset) of major political actors. But even on its own terms, abstracted from any sense of constituencies, values, or socio-economic dynamics, 'growth' cannot function politically.³⁰ This will be true *even if* over time the government does deliver headline economic growth. This strategic flaw is consistently noted even by broadly sympathetic centrist commentators: growth *for what?* We might expand on this to ask what are the structural obstacles to growth, and therefore the political enemies of Starmerism?

Similar questions were repeatedly asked of the Blair governments, with the difference that they did have the intellectual and political resources to fall back on in reply. The closest analogy was 'modernisation'. At face value, this is as empty of content as 'growth' (indeed, economic growth is, by definition, more specific and measurable than modernisation). However, at its most effective, modernisation was discursively linked to future-oriented imaginaries, notably the 'global knowledge economy', as well as substantive policy areas including investment in public services. It was even powerfully deployed in identifying Blair's political enemies: the 'forces of conservatism' on left and right who stood in the way of modernisation.³¹ Starmer and his circle seem to lack the political intent, skill and intellectual resources to weave these kinds of connections.

The dead-end of transactionalism

A key feature of Starmerism is its *transactional* character. Indeed, Starmer has looked more comfortable in negotiations on what is - largely owing to President Trump - an increasingly transactional geopolitical stage (e.g. in tariff negotiations with Trump, building coalitions for Ukraine or 'resetting' post-Brexit relations with the EU). It has long been observed that political leaders often prefer international diplomacy to managing domestic affairs. This may be true of Starmer, with the formulas of international diplomacy being attractive to his 'Mr Rules' persona. However, there is a more structural reason for the Starmer government's transactional approach. I have argued that Starmerism is devoid of sociological or ideological content, and as such apolitical in the sense of lacking a project. However, paradoxically, such a condition

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can also be read as ‘pure’ politics in a narrower sense, when this is understood as the *realpolitik* of calculation and dealmaking. Through this lens Starmer’s ‘success’ in tariff negotiations with Trump should not be understood as simply a pragmatic response to the President’s favoured *modus operandi*: it represents, rather, the only available - and entirely consistent - form of political action to have emanated from the Starmer worldview and practice.

Such a transactional approach has also been a (somewhat unremarked) feature of the domestic agenda, evident in a series of relatively transparent moves towards or against specific interest groups. After the election there was an immediate intervention to ‘settle’ the inherited, de-stabilising doctors’ strike in the NHS; employers (via national insurance) and farmers (via inheritance tax) were high profile losers of early revenue raising measures; following the Reform surge in local elections, alongside an authoritarian turn in rhetoric, there was a raft of policy shifts affecting migrants; and in the face of a backlash from the parliamentary party and public, there have been reverses in unpopular cuts to winter fuel payments and the two-child benefits cap. Of course, governing always involves transactions as key tools in building support and staving off dissent. But what has been striking about the Starmer government is the apparently ‘scattergun’ and ad hoc nature of such measures, which has alienated a growing number of constituencies. Again, the absence of any ideological framework - in which an appeal can be made to values and societal direction - means that the purpose and outcomes of transactions can’t be discursively framed. Consequently, winners might not even know they are winners (let alone why they are), while there is no way to mitigate the sense of loss among the losers. Issue-specific ‘wins’ (such as the initial settling of the doctors’ strike) should not be confused with the strategic coalition building of hegemonic politics. Yet one-off, iterative transactions are all that appears to be left in the broader political vacuum.

This transactional dynamic exists in the shadow of a reductive psephology and electoral strategy that has haunted Labour since at least the Blair era;³² and it takes us back to Hall’s Gramscian critique of New Labour’s closed reading of social change and political identities, in contrast to a more expansive, open and contested vision.³³ The prevarication and stasis of Starmer’s government can be traced to a political practice that simply ‘reads off’ policy and messaging from opinion survey data. Eunice Goes has detailed how - having identified the varieties

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of working-class voters Labour had been losing over the long term - Starmer's key election advisers each presented different variants of their characteristics. What they agreed on was that 'Labour needed to develop a policy agenda and narrative that reflected the worldviews and interests of those voters'.³⁴ Of course, political strategists always need to understand voter preferences. But simply mirroring back to people what they already are or think - even if this were possible - is an abdication of political leadership and can never underpin a hegemonic project.³⁵ This was true in a more homogenous mid-twentieth century society, with its stabler voter alignments and preferences. But the problem is magnified in increasingly complex, individualised and fluid societies such as Britain in the 2020s. We are left with an image of Starmer's team agonising over every statement and policy announcement, unable to act decisively for fear of antagonising this or that fraction of a particular - imagined - demographic.

While the image is almost comical, it indicates something serious about the limits of Starmerism as a political and governing project, let alone a transformative, hegemonic proposition. Ironically, it is precisely when preferences become more individualised, fragmented and unstable that the case for clear, bold leadership and narrative becomes stronger. As Andy Beckett argues, 'At the next general election, whether the government moved left or right when it hit trouble will matter less to Britain's many unideological voters than whether it did so with a clear and convincing rationale'.³⁶ Yes, such a rationale must (in contrast to reductive and hubristic readings of leadership) resonate and demonstrate empathy with the lived experience of voters. But it must also understand - along with Gramsci, Hall and all those who have grasped transformative politics - that the 'preferences' and aspirations of citizens (just like those of political projects) are never fully formed. Worldviews are made and remade in conversation with a host of influences (cultural, economic, familial) - and, among these, political ideology, narrative and messaging still play a crucial role. In its own, distorted way, this kind of clarity is exactly part of resurgent populism's appeal, but it is something that Starmerism is apparently incapable of.

Conclusion

One source of the frustration felt by a range of Labour sympathisers is that the resources to develop a bolder, more coherent and transformative politics remain

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tantalisingly at hand. It is not difficult - as, indeed, Rachel Reeves at one point had begun to indicate - to imagine how 'growth' and 'security' might be more progressively inflected, in ways entirely consistent with a mainstream social-democratic programme commanding broad support. 'Growth' could be elaborated in terms of a more activist state, removing the distortions of deep social inequality and rentier capital, and offering a vision of the good society and individual flourishing that the proceeds of growth are aimed at. 'Security', too, can be thought of in more progressive and expansive terms: the role of the state and supportive communities as an anchoring platform for individual wellbeing; stability and respect at work; the importance of care and dignity at all stages of the life course; international co-operation and engagement with global challenges such as external aggression, poverty, migration and climate change. There is also potential here for initiating urgent debates over what human security means in the context of the rapid development of AI.

The values-based resources for such a strategic reset are available, even for a Labour Party led from its right.³⁷ The fact that they are conspicuously not being deployed looks like a political choice: and this takes us back to explanations that focus on the power-seeking of a right-wing Labour faction, bereft of purpose now in government. However, the still more pessimistic reading is that even with a change of strategy and/or leadership, there is something about the complexity of the present conjuncture that makes such a political recalibration itself likely to fail. This article has been predicated on the view that successful political strategies rely on clear-sighted sociological analysis, married to a coherent set of values. But it may be that the *extent* of radical social change since the last period of centre-left hegemony renders such a strategy itself unworkable - something much more fundamental than the political calculations of any government. On this reading, both elements of our formula for hegemony - a reading of the social and the value-based agenda to intervene in it - have potentially been 'hollowed out'.

To understand this, we should consider the acceleration of the tendencies identified by Third Way sociology three decades ago, as discussed above. First, *individualisation* has since intensified to the extent that the hegemonic strategy of appealing to and constructing political subjectivities may now simply be impossible, especially when the appeal is to social solidarity and collectivism.

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Second, there has been a similar radicalisation of ‘*manufactured uncertainty*’ - a concept that was initially posited by Giddens in a pre-internet era where information was already proliferating (e.g. via satellite technology). Since then, the exponential growth of online (dis)information has generated such disorientation, distrust and conspiracy that appeals to the good society - let alone empirical evidence for the type of policies that might lead there - struggle to gain traction. The third trend Giddens identified was *de-traditionalisation*, a process that has long been documented in the form of declining political partisanship and voting behaviour. Owing to the acceleration of individualisation and manufactured uncertainty, this may now have permanently delegitimised political parties and institutions, and in particular the claims of progressives to speak for a common good.³⁸

In the face of these structural and political threats, the centre-left either implicitly or explicitly finds itself as one of the few remaining defenders of liberal democratic institutions, a shared political culture and the means of actually verifying truth claims - *at the very moment these entities are collapsing*.³⁹ On this reading - just as was the case with the New Times of the late 1980s and an ascendant neoliberalism - the centre-left has a more daunting challenge than its main political competitors, today in the form of right-wing populists. Given accelerating social, political and epistemological fragmentation, the intellectual and political task lies in determining what is worth defending, what can be let go of, and the progressive case for such choices: all in contrast to what is being offered by the populist right. For such work even to be contemplated requires a government with the intellectual resources - and political will - to move from a politics of nothing to at least a politics of *something*.

Will Leggett is Professor of Political Sociology in the School of Social Policy & Society, University of Birmingham, UK. He has written extensively on social theory, social democratic politics and strategy, and last year was the twentieth anniversary of his *After New Labour: Social Theory and Centre-Left Politics* (Palgrave).

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Notes

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