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'New' Labour and the 'new' labour history

Introduction

Since 1994 Tony Blair has led the Labour Party to unprecedented levels of electoral success: in 1997 he ended the Party's eighteen years in the wilderness by winning a Commons majority of 179 seats; four years later he gained re-election on virtually the same basis.[1] According to many Party members these triumphs were, however, bought at an unacceptably high price. For they believed Blair had won power by transforming Labour into a weak echo of the Conservatives and took his claim to have established 'New' Labour as signifying that the Party's time-honoured character had been forsaken. Thus, 'New' – in contrast to 'Old' – Labour was thought to have abandoned the trade unions in favour of big business; cast aside state intervention for the free market; and downgraded the pursuit of equality while promoting tax cuts for the wealthy. The former Cabinet minister Roy Hattersley even asserted that his Party was the victim of a 'coup d'etat', the leaders of which had committed 'apostasy' against its traditions.[2] Therefore, even though members celebrated the Party's centenary in 2000, Labour's history had – according to this perspective – actually come to an end, for whatever 'New' Labour represented, it was not the historical – or 'Old' – Labour Party.

This article assesses the extent to which 'New' Labour can be viewed in such terms and forms part of a wider attempt to recast interpretations of the contemporary Party.[3] It will argue that, despite the views of many in the Party, Blair's leadership forms a continuum with those who advocated 'revisionism' during the post-war period. Despite the fact that one of its most prominent advocates, Hugh Gaitskell, led Labour during 1955–1963; many other adherents established an influential niche within the Parliamentary leadership during the 1960s and 1970s; and their outlook, as expressed in Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956), influenced Labour's course after 1945, revisionism holds an uncertain position in most accounts of the Party's past. This, however, says as much about those who have written about Labour's past as it does about the actual nature of that past, for revisionism made an unrivalled contribution to Labour's history.[4]

In their early days 'New' Labour's leaders emphasised the extent to which they disavowed the Party's past, hoping this would persuade middle-class and affluent working-class voters to back Blair. Yet, at the same time, for the benefit of Labour members, they claimed that theirs

1 The author wishes to thank Stefan Berger and Nick Tiratsoo for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.
2 *Observer*, 24 June 2001 and *Guardian*, 27 June 2001.
3 For which see S. Fielding, *The Labour Party. Continuity and Change in the Making of 'New' Labour* (London, 2002) and 'New Labour and its past', in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *A Centenary History of the Labour Party* (Cambridge, 2000).
4 R. Desai, *Intellectuals and Socialism. 'Social Democrats' and the Labour Party* (London, 1994).

was a transformation of means not ends. Despite such a dual emphasis, most analysts favoured the view that Blair's leadership marked a decisive break with the past. If this was a reflection of a profound lack of historical perspective amongst contemporary commentators, it nonetheless drew sustenance from the work of many labour historians. However, by the 1990s British labour history was, like Labour, in need of some 'modernisation', undergoing, as it was a 'crisis' comparable to that endured by the Party prior to the advent of Blair. Many of the characteristic themes and interests of labour historians were increasingly at odds with, for want of a better word, 'reality'. There were, moreover, alternative standpoints available – some informed by political studies and others by social history – which suggested that 'New' Labour enjoyed a contrastig relationship to the Party's history. In their different ways, these viewpoints endorsed the Blair leadership's own description of its place in Labour history.

'New' Labour and Labour's history

Before surveying how others locate 'New' Labour in the Party's past, it is necessary to indicate how the Blair leadership has conceptualised this matter. To the irritation of most stalwarts, some 'New' Labour zealots have exhibited a high-handed disregard for Party tradition. According to Blair's adviser Philip Gould, for example, until 1994 Labour was beset by numerous problems imbedded at its inception: it was in particular 'too close' to the trade unions and 'too obsessive' about public ownership. The unions were an especial weakness given their 'sectional and inward-looking' disposition, something that only reinforced the 'cautious, defensive and backward-looking' nature of the British working class. From this perspective, Labour at the outset was deeply flawed and in need of wholesale transformation: thus, as one enthusiast put it, Blair's accession to the leadership effectively marked 'New' Labour's 'year zero'.[5]

In contrast, Blair and Gordon Brown articulated a more measured view of Party history and 'New' Labour's place within it.[6] Their basic contention was that, while remaining true to its established values, 'New' Labour was forced to reject policies once considered appropriate to their realisation. Thus, Blair described his object as 'not about dumping principle', but actually, 'retrieving what the Labour Party is really about' and applying its 'enduring, lasting principles' to a new context. 'New' Labour, then, should be seen as a vindication, not rejection, of Party history, albeit one that liberated it from the 'terrible tyranny of confusing ends with means'.

5 P. Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution. How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London, 1998), pp. 24–26, 392; P. Richards, 'The Permanent Revolution of New Labour' in A. Coddington and M. Perryman (eds.), *The Moderniser's Dilemma. Radical Politics in the Age of Blair* (London, 1998), p. 37.

6 Unless stated otherwise, the account contained in the following three paragraphs is based on T. Blair, *New Britain. My Vision of a Young Country* (London, 1996); Blair's introduction to T. Wright and M. Carter, *The People's Party. A History of the Labour Party* (London, 1997); G. Brown, 'The politics of potential: a new agenda for Labour' in D. Miliband (ed), *Reinventing the Left* (Cambridge, 1994); and G. Brown and T. Wright, 'Introduction' in G. Brown and T. Wright (eds), *Values, Visions and Voices. An Anthology of Socialism* (Edinburgh, 1995).

To Brown's eyes, 'New' Labour's policies manifested 'an underlying continuity of approach' because they remained underpinned by 'fundamental socialist values'. The distinctive feature of these ideals was their morality: Labour's belief system was 'at root, more an ethic of society than an economic doctrine', being a 'project of human emancipation' derived from a faith in the 'equal worth of all individuals'. This stipulated that everybody 'should have the opportunity to realise their potential in full', to which end 'the strength of society' was 'essential'. As Blair noted, the history of workers' cooperatives, friendly societies and trade unions was 'one of individuals coming together for self-improvement and to improve people's potential through collective action'.[7]

Accordingly, Labour's post-war electoral difficulties did not arise from the Party's values but from its reluctance to disassociate them from policies that eventually fell into disrepute. Brown, for example, accepted that nationalisation was the only means by which Clement Attlee could have promoted the 'liberation of individual potential' in the 1940s. However, as Blair would point out, even then Labour supporters did not vote for 'some abstract notion of the public good' but supported a 'collectivist government because that government was going to do good by them'. Thus, even under Attlee Labour represented 'society's ambition for improvement'. Nonetheless, subsequent post-war affluence undermined the necessity for this form of collectivism while the public sector became unpopular due to the heavy tax burden it imposed on even those with modest incomes. By the 1970s, therefore, many considered that government impeded improvement. While Brown and Blair considered that state control of industry had ceased to be necessary or possible, they asserted that Labour remained distinct from the Conservatives due to its continued readiness 'to use the power of society in order to advance the individual'.[8] If social and economic change meant, as Brown put it, an end to the 'era of big, centralised government' and there was no hope of 'maintaining the old processes of mass production, of intervention and control', the principles that underlay such policies could still, according to Blair, be applied 'anew and afresh'.[9]

In outlining this view of Party history Blair in particular suggested that Liberalism formed a legitimate part of Labour's past and urged his members to 'welcome the radical left-of-centre tradition outside our own party'.[10] To the chagrin of many old hands, he expressed regret that Labour's pre-1914 association with the Liberal Party had given way to independence at the end of the First World War. Indeed, according to Gould the parties' divorce had disastrous consequences, as it separated Liberalism, 'with its emphasis on individualism and tolerance', from Labourism, which stressed 'solidarity and social justice'. As a result, Labour became a one-dimensional, 'dogmatic, statist party' unable to cope with post-war change.[11]

7 *Guardian*, 25 May 1994.
8 *Financial Times*, 11 June 1994.
9 T. Blair, speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research, 14 January 1999, www.number-10.gov.uk.
10 Blair, *New Britain*, pp. 7, 11–12.
11 Gould, *Revolution*, pp. 27 and 397.

When Blair referred to Liberalism he nonetheless meant a particular sort, that is Edwardian New Liberalism, which as numerous political historians have indicated, questioned laissez-faire economics and pure individualism and sought to reconcile liberty with a collectivist state that pursued the common good.[12] Wanting to 'civilise', but not replace capitalism, they promoted the Asquith government's establishment of what many see as the foundations of the post-1945 welfare state. Younger New Liberals, such as William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes, also influenced Labour's social and economic policies after the Second World War.

Under the auspices of a pact with the Liberals, in 1906 Labour had returned its first significant number of MPs, an arrangement that held until the First World War. New Liberals believed that, if Labour would never fully appeal to middle-class voters, their own Party could not successfully mobilise manual workers: to beat the Conservatives they needed each other. Apart from such pragmatism, there was also a genuine community of interests: Leonard Hobhouse for one believed there was 'no division in principle or method' between most in Labour's ranks and his own New Liberals.[13] Thus, as some historians argue, had it not been for the 1914–1918 War, the Lib-Lab alliance might have continued.[14] Even after 1918, Hobhouse looked on the division between the two parties with scepticism, considering that 'moderate' Labour leaders represented 'essential Liberalism' better than the Liberal Party itself.

Blair's admiration for Liberalism was in any case not unprecedented: previous Party luminaries, including the left-wing intellectual Harold Laski, argued that Liberalism constituted part of the 'great tradition' to which Labour was heir.[15] An openness to Liberalism was however most associated with those conventionally located on the Labour right, that is its post-war revisionists, described by the political philosopher Michael Freeden as the 'central example' of socialist-liberal 'intermingling'.[16] As their designation implies, revisionists often found themselves arguing against that which was taken to be Labour tradition. Thus, they argued the Party had to look beyond nationalisation and a class-based electoral strategy if it was to prosper in the post-war world. Gaitskell for one tried his best to counter the impression that state control was Labour's 'ultimate first principle and aim', believing it derived from 'a complete confusion about the fundamental meaning of socialism and, in particular, a misunderstanding about ends and means'.[17] The Party's definitive ends were, in the revisionist schema, the furtherance of freedom and equality, the latter being a precondition of the former. Yet, if the

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12 P.F. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978) and M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism. An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978).

13 J. Meadowcroft, 'Introduction' in L.T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism and Other Writings* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. ix–xxvi.

14 P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971) and D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990).

15 *Report of the 44th Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London, 1945), pp. 143–144.

16 M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 470–471.

17 *Report of the 58th Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London, 1959), pp. 107–109

pursuit of greater equality was crucial to their outlook, more public ownership was marginal to its achievement.[18]

Revisionists also questioned other aspects of what some believed were Labour's defining characteristics. Roy Jenkins, for example, responded to the 1959 general election defeat by suggesting the Party should distance itself from the unions.[19] Despite this, revisionists were keen to demonstrate the extent to they were true to their interpretation of what constituted Labour's tradition. This was illustrated by the manifesto of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism (CDS), formed in 1960 to advance the revisionist cause. The CDS claimed Labour's 'central tradition' was defined by a 'non-doctrinal, practical, humanitarian socialism'; this was 'a creed of conscience and reform rather than of class hatred'. It moreover envisaged Labour as 'a broadly-based national party of all the people' albeit 'based predominantly on working people'.[20]

During the 1970s, as full employment and unending growth came to an end, younger revisionists believed the state, as constituted after 1945, was now impeding economic efficiency. Moreover, popular opinion seemed to have moved against government intervention, high spending, welfare and the pursuit of equality. Thus, still holding that greater equality was their primary goal, an increasing number considered it could only be achieved through a decentralisation, if not contraction, of government.[21] As such 'neo-revisionists' moved further from the state, the increasingly influential Party activists embraced public ownership with unprecedented fervour. By 1981 the tension was too much for some revisionists, so they formed the Social Democratic Party, hoping to recreate what Jenkins described as the 'old Labour Party of Attlee and Gaitskell' and resurrect the 'coalition of liberal social democrats and industrially responsible trade unionists' which had formed its basis.[22]

On this basis, it should have been no surprise when Gould described revisionism as Labour's 'first modernising tendency' and Brown claimed to be following in Crosland's footsteps.[23] Even so, that 'New' Labour advanced policies that placed a greater reliance on the market than the likes of Gaitskell while asserting the same commitment to equality, most took as evidence of its ideological incoherence. Yet, what Blair grandly referred to as the 'Third Way' was merely recognition that times had changed – mass unemployment, for example, had replaced full employment – and so time-bound means needed to be altered while fundamental ends could remain the same.[24]

18 Fielding, '*New' Labour*, pp. 57–84; T. Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party. From Gaitskell to Blair* (London, 1996), pp. 25–40

19 T. Benn, *Years of Hope. Diaries, Papers and Letters 1940–1962* (London, 1994), pp. 317–319

20 S. Fielding, *The Labour Party Since 1951. 'Socialism' and Society* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 61–62.

21 I. Crewe and A. King, *SDP. The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 36–38, 93, 125–127; J.P. Mackintosh, 'Has social democracy failed in Britain?', *Political Quarterly*, 49 (1978), pp. 266–267; S. Williams, *Politics is for People* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 28–29.

22 R. Jenkins, *Partnership of Principle* (London, 1985), pp. 11, 26, 29, 35.

23 Gould, *Revolution*, pp. 30–31, 33; G. Brown, 'Equality – then and now' in D. Leonard (ed.), *Crosland and New Labour* (London, 1999).

24 T. Blair, 'The Third Way', *Fabian Pamphlet*, No. 588 (1998).

Catching up with Thatcher?

Most analysts based within political science have disregarded 'New' Labour's attempt to locate itself within the Party's past; instead they consider that Blair's leadership represented a radical break with what they take to be its traditional emphases. Indeed, much work on the subject rarely looks beyond the 1980s for 'New' Labour's roots. Thus, while some consider the party's fourth electoral defeat in a row, that of 1992, to have been a key influence, many suggest the earlier 1987 reverse and the consequent Policy Review was more significant; others in contrast believe Neil Kinnock's election as leader in 1983 was more influential; and at least one has posited that the Labour left's loss of control of the National Executive Committee in the autumn of 1981 was the moment when the Party's reinvention truly began.[25]

Whatever the precise starting point, however, all concur that the engine of change was the Labour leadership's desire to, as Colin Hay has put it, 'catch-up' with Thatcherism.[26] Tentatively under Kinnock, and then enthusiastically under Blair, the leadership is believed to have accepted that the only road to electoral recovery lay in their unquestioning embrace of Conservative ideology. Thus, if, as Richard Heffernan has it, 'New' Labour was merely the climax of a gradual and incremental accommodation with the Conservatives' neo-liberal agenda, it was only in 1994 that the Party finally 'caught-up'.[27] The logic of this position is that the person most responsible for 'New' Labour was Margaret Thatcher.

It would be foolhardy to deny that eighteen years of Conservative rule could have had no effect on Labour. After all, the British electoral system promotes a generous degree of cross-fertilisation between the two main parties, as to win a Commons majority they have to compete for the same small number of electors in the same handful of marginal constituencies. More fundamentally, during 1979–1997 the Conservatives curtailed the size of the state, reshaping its structure and purpose while fostering economic changes that altered the nature of the electorate. Most directly, the Thatcher and John Major governments cut income tax and encouraged a widespread fatalism about collective action. As a result, Britain in 1997 was a very different place to the country that last saw a Labour government. In particular, in 1979 one-third of workers were employed in manufacturing but by 1997 this figure was below one-fifth. Partly as a result of this shift, the number of trade unionists fell, from rather more than twelve million to just under seven million – less than one-third of the employed. The Conservatives also deliberately followed policies that increased inequality to what was, in post-war terms, an unprecedented extent.

Between 1979 and 1997 not only did the number of Labour's most enthusiastic supporters fall precipitately but the divide between such voters and the rest of society also increased markedly. Both factors conspired to make Labour's attempt to construct an election winning

25 A. Lent, 'Labour's transformation: searching for the point of origin', *Politics*, 17:1 (1997).
26 C. Hay, 'Labour's Thatcherite revisionism: playing the „Politics of Catch-up"', *Political Studies*, 42:4 (1994); see also C. Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour* (Manchester, 1999).
27 R. Heffernan, 'Labour's transformation: a staged process', *Politics,* 18:2 (1998).

coalition, one that united society's winners and losers, much more difficult. It would have been remarkable – indeed foolhardy – had Labour not responded in some way or another. Yet to characterise change as exemplifying the politics of 'catch-up', and so the acceptance of an alien ideology, overlooked the considerable similarities of outlook that Blair and Brown shared with their revisionist predecessors.

The development of 'vanguardism'

As Eric Shaw suggests, so many students of the contemporary Party currently believe 'New' Labour marks a decisive break with tradition because of their focus on the very recent past.[28] Lack of historical perspective is, however, only part of the explanation, for prominent exponents of labour history also stress change over continuity. Royden Harrison, for example, claimed that 'New' Labour threatened 'an unravelling' of Labour's 'entire history'.[29] Yet, such views were decidedly partial, being the products of the intellectual cul-de-sac in which, by the mid-1990s, many labour historians found themselves trapped.

When the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) was established in 1960 it embraced a generous view of the subject so it could include Communists, the New Left, Social Democrats, Liberals and even the odd Conservative. Its objective was to study the institutions and persons comprising that which at the time was widely referred to as the 'labour movement'. Certain exponents of labour history at this time, in particular Eric Hobsbawm, were also leading figures in the emerging field of social history. They hoped a wider view of working-class experience would circumvent what Hobsbawm referred to as the 'tendency to reduce labour history to the history of labour organisations'. To some, such as Asa Briggs, social history might at the very least provide an important supplement to the study of such institutions.[30] Nonetheless, as labour and social history developed their distinctive academic apparatus a clear division of responsibility emerged. Social historians focussed on matters like the family, housing, leisure and standards of living: while often motivated by left-leaning sympathies they fought shy of overtly political subjects and concentrated on the concerns of apparently apolitical 'ordinary' people.[31] Labour historians, in contrast, highlighted those individuals and organisations that claimed to represent working-class interests. They usually saw little need to place these subjects in a wider social context. Labour history as a result became prey to two tendencies: what shall be described here as 'vanguardism' along with a reverence for labour movement institutions.

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28 E. Shaw, 'British social democracy: expiring or reviving?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54:1 (2001), p. 172.
29 R.J. Harrison, *New Labour as Past History* (Nottingham, 1996), p. 3.
30 A. Briggs, 'Open questions of labour history', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1 (1960), pp. 2–3.
31 R. Samuel, 'What is social history?' in J. Gardiner (ed), *What is History Today?* (London, 1988).

Between the late 1960s and early 1980s the Labour left wrested control from the Party's revisionist leadership.[32] Under the left's aegis, Labour abandoned its established 'catch-all' electoral strategy and cast aside any scepticism regarding further public ownership: these traits were seen as underpinning the 'betrayals' of the 1964–1970 and 1974–1979 governments. Instead, the left prioritised policies designed to advance working-class – or more properly trade union – interests, a strategy inspired by the unprecedented workplace militancy of union members, which many believed enabled the Party to directly confront capitalism. More prosaically, this shift was based on left-wing activists assuming control of constituency General Management Committees across the country so as to exert greater authority within the Party nationally. By taking command of the institutions of the labour movement the left believed it could alter policy and change the nature of the leadership. Thus, once led by those committed to overturning the status quo, Tony Benn for one believed Labour could simply 'inject' into voters the appropriate values and build a 'socialist' Britain.[33]

The vanguardism evident in this strategy reflected the preferred focus of many labour historians, more than some of who were active in promoting Labour's radicalisation. Harrison, for example, was a founding member of the Socialist Charter, an attempt to transform Labour into a more leftist organisation.[34] Indeed, John Saville – ex-Communist and a founder of the New Left – went so far as to suggest that those lacking such experiences were disqualified from being considered competent labour historians.[35] Unsurprisingly, in their historical work those of this persuasion focussed on the few who in the past had also challenged the status quo. There was ostensibly good reason for this: radical minorities were largely responsible for establishing the labour movement and influencing its development. Historians of this kind saw rescuing these groups, from what Edward Thompson famously referred to as the 'condescension of posterity', as a vital contemporary political act. Unfortunately, even the most accomplished work written in this vein could confuse radical minorities with the working class a whole. Thus, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) was about many things – but not the labouring majority. For Thompson not only left obscure what Geoffrey Best described as the 'flag-saluting, foreigner-hating, peer-respecting side of the plebeian mind' but also failed to take due account of those who lived their lives untouched by riot, machine-breaking or strikes.[36]

The success of Thompson's work nonetheless gave further impetus to younger historians who, during the 1960s and 1970s, wished to recover the experience of those minorities that dared to resist capitalism. It is, however, questionable the extent to which this was motivated

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32 For more on this period, see P. Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Left* (London, 1987) and M. Wickham-Jones, *Economic Strategy and the Labour Party* (London, 1996).

33 T. Benn, *Arguments for Democracy* (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 211–212.

34 Labour Party Archive, Jo Richardson/Ian Mikardo papers, Box 12, Socialist Charter 1968 file, Charter drafting committee minutes, 12 March 1968.

35 J. Saville, 'The crisis in labour history: a further comment', *Labour History Review*, 61:3 (1996), pp. 322–323.

36 G. Best,' The making of the English working class', *Historical Journal*, 8 (1965), p. 278.

by a legitimate concern to recover struggles previously hidden from history or the rather more dubious desire to validate the historian's own political perspective. Thus, it is doubtful the extent to which the impressive historiography of the Communist Party of Great Britain reflects its historical significance. This was a body that, after all, never claimed more than 60,000 members and endured a relationship with workers that – outside a few northern engineering factories, South Welsh mining villages and East End streets – was frosty at best. Labour historians who enjoyed an acute knowledge of social history, such as Hobsbawm, appreciated that the world of the militant was not that of the majority.[37] Others, inspired by Thompson's wish to recover and celebrate working-class 'potential', rejected this outlook. Instead they appeared to believe that the radical minority enjoyed an immanent connection with the majority, such that even the most outwardly apathetic of dispositions embodied a sophisticated critique of the political order.[38] This was evidence of, as Hobsbawm noted in the early 1970s, one of the more striking weaknesses of labour history: too many exponents acted as 'scholarly sympathizers' with their subjects and so allowed political commitment to cloud their judgement.[39]

The 'crisis' of labour history

Those who focused on the institutions of the labour movement, or the 'great men' who led them, were often at odds with exponents of vanguardism: Henry Pelling, for example, was no friend of British Communism. Yet, whatever their differences, most labour historians believed in the importance to the future of the British working class of those battles between leaders and the 'rank-and-file' for control of the movement. By the 1970s it was nonetheless increasingly evident that Labour and the trade unions were losing much of their purchase over the working class. Hobsbawm's 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture was the first public sign that elements on the left were recognising this state of affairs. Characteristically, while criticising Labour's leadership for its timidity, Hobsbawm believed the decline and dissipation of the 'traditional' working-class and its 'common style of life' underpinned the Party's weakening appeal.[40]

Ironically, Hobsbawm's belief in the relative homogeneity of proletarian culture between the 1880s and 1950s was increasingly questioned as the 1980s drew on.[41] Those of Hobsbawm's generation and others schooled in the events of 1968 considered that class feeling was central to working-class life. In contrast, younger social historians emphasised the fact that class was but one of the influences on a worker's identity: status, gender, generation and ethnicity also

37 E. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984), p. 192.
38 J. Hinton, '1945 and the Apathy School', *History Workshop*, 43 (1997), pp. 267–268.
39 E. Hobsbawm, 'Ideology and labour history', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 27 (1973), pp. 32–33.
40 E. Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of labour halted?' in M. Jacques and F. Mulhern (eds), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1981), pp. 1–19.
41 Hobsbawm, *Worlds*, pp. 176–213

played a part – and sometimes the dominating one.[42] Moreover, political historians also questioned the extent to which the labour movement had ever enjoyed the 'natural' support of even industrial labourers. Some considered that Labour did not so much emerge out of working-class experience but was an imposition upon it.[43]

It was not until 1995, in an editorial written by David Howell in *Labour History Review*, the journal of the SSLH, that labour historians were forced to confront their own 'crisis'. Howell revealed how few labour historians had lived up the hopes of the Society's founders: too much labour history, he claimed, remained institutionally based, prioritised the experiences of male workers and was theoretically naive. Admitting that political considerations prevented many colleagues from taking such criticism seriously, Howell still found time to despair that Labour – by now with Blair at its head – was accommodating itself to Thatcherism.[44] The extent to which Howell's intervention has had an impact can be seen in the slowly changing content of *Labour History Review* over recent years. In the short-term, however, he provoked a paltry debate in which those few Society members moved to write, divided equally between correspondents believing Howell had gone too far and others fearing he had not gone far enough.[45] Moreover, despite including contributions on women and working-class racism, a recent collection of essays published under the auspices of the Society indicated that many leading labour historians remained enamoured of the vanguardist and institutionalist enthusiasms of the past.[46]

The most pertinent question provoked by the 'crisis' of labour history was what kind of relationship its subject – the labour movement – enjoyed with the working class. The focus on radical minorities was based on the view that they represented the obscured potential of working people while the justification for studying labour movement institutions was that they enjoyed a rapport with the working class. Yet, as Neil Kinnock informed the Labour Party in 1983, after its left-inspired campaign had led to terrible defeat, the Party had some time before ceased to reflect the 'realities' of many workers.[47] Some wondered how far the labour movement had ever done so.

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42 See for example, A. Davies and S. Fielding (eds), *Workers' Worlds. Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880–1939*, (Manchester, 1992).
43 J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993).
44 D. Howell, 'Editorial', *Labour History Review*, 60:1 (1995), p. 2.
45 See *Labour History Review*, 60:3 (1995), pp. 46–53 and 61:3 (1996), pp. 322–328.
46 See especially J. McIlroy, A. Campbell and N. Fishman, 'Introduction' in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Volume 2. The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–1979* (Aldershot, 1999).
47 *Report of the 82nd Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London, 1983), p. 30.

Plus ça change: Miliband and after

In its early years, SSLH conferences attracted the participation of political scientists, from Ralph Miliband to Robert McKenzie. This involvement, however, did not last, probably because, as Miliband complained in 1960 and Howell thirty-five years later, most labour historians were so inhospitable to theorising.[48] There have, nonetheless, always been politics specialists interested in the Party and the unions, whose concerns overlapped with labour history. They are presently organised by the Labour Movements Group of the Political Studies Association.[49]

Rather than see 'New' Labour as a historical break, many of those working on the boundaries of history and politics see more of a continuity of approach between Blair and his predecessors.[50] Probably the single most influential perspective generated within this milieu was first articulated in Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961). Miliband argued that Labour from the outset was never committed to the radical transformation of the economy but was instead a party of 'modest social reform', firmly committed to the electoral road and 'irrevocably rooted' to capitalism.[51] As various studies written in this vein went on to claim, while the Party's organisational link with the unions was close, if necessary a Labour Prime Minister would sacrifice workers' interests to save capitalism and, to that extent, was little different to any Conservative counterpart.[52] Interestingly, not all labour historians agreed with this perspective. Harrison, for example, considered it too closed a view: as someone who had worked long and hard to transform Labour into what he considered to be a socialist party, Harrison opposed an interpretative schema that asserted the Party could never become such an organisation.[53]

Armed with Miliband's framework David Coates has nonetheless asserted that 'New' and 'Old' Labour are essentially the same. If marking a retreat from the Party's leftist phase, in most respects 'New' Labour represented a return to a way of thinking that formed the basis for all Labour governments since 1945. Thus Blair – as other European centre-left 'modernizers' – sought to 'work with the grain of market forces, in a collaborative relationship with senior managers in major companies, to trigger privately-generated economic growth'.[54] Coates now considers that the changes wrought by Thatcher have probably made it impossi-

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48 Briggs, 'Open questions', p. 3; Howell, 'Editorial', p. 2.

49 The Labour Movements Group website is to be found at www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/N-Q/pol/lmsg.html.

50 See for example T. Bale, 'The logic of no alternative? Political scientists, historians and the politics of Labour's past', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 1:2 (1999) and S. Ludlam, 'The making of New Labour' in S. Ludlam, and M.J. Smith (eds), *New Labour in Government* (London, 2001).

51 R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London, 1972), p. 376.

52 D. Coates, *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism* (Cambridge, 1975) and *Labour in Power? A Study of the Labour Government, 1974–1979* (London, 1980); L. Panitch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy* (Cambridge, 1976).

53 R. Harrison, 'Labour Party history: approaches and interpretations', *Labour History Review*, 56:1 (1991), pp. 8-9.

54 D. Coates, 'Labour governments: old constraints and new parameters', *New Left Review*, 291 (1996).

ble for any Labour government – should it so want – to reform capitalism to the significant advantage of the majority.[55] This fatalism has not always defined the outlook of those who followed Miliband; indeed they shared the vanguardist assumptions of the majority of labour historians. Thus, like Miliband, they suggested that the British working class contained within it a socialist, or at least radical, potential. This potential has, however, been persistently smothered by Labour's adherence to capitalism and a 'Parliamentary socialism' which meant its leaders refused to grasp opportunities presented to it by, for example, the Second World War and the union militancy of the 1960s. Moreover, Coates has traced the Party's failure to create a 'hegemonic relationship' with its supporters, and the 'socialist universe' of newspapers and associations that would have followed, back to its narrowly electoralist disposition.[56]

A 'new' labour history?

During the 1990s a heterogeneous group of Labour Party historians, schooled in labour history but appreciative of wider social and institutional factors, challenged many of the assumptions outlined above. It is tempting, although perhaps unwise to refer to this as establishing a 'new' labour history as, in certain respects, adherents have merely tried to fulfil the promise held out by the formation of the SSLH. This was a promise largely betrayed by the subsequent development of what might be now tentatively described as the 'old' labour history. For, instead of engaging with social history and political science, most labour historians after 1960 celebrated the vanguardist elite and so reinforced rather than contextualised and questioned the outlook of those they studied. Even historians who refrained from such enthusiasms and studied the institutions or great figures of the labour movement largely failed to engage with the world outside. Thus, rather like the subjects they researched, both vanguardists and institutionalists were always too preoccupied with the internal world of the labour movement to understand the reasons for its degenerating position within British society.

In some ways, therefore, the 'new' labour history is a continuation of the 'old' labour history's obscured trends. Indeed, it echoes the concerns of Henry Pelling, author of a number of key texts published in the 1950s and 1960s. Pelling is often – and rightly – characterised as a methodologically conservative historian who was mainly interested in organisations and individuals. Yet, Pelling was also interested in exploring the relationship between electoral politics and social structure, attempted to locate labour movement institutions in their wider social setting and studied working-class attitudes with an eye free of vanguardist assumptions.[57] Indeed, as the 'new' labour history was effectively producing a 'social history of the Labour Party' and exploring a number of what the canon would have cast as 'non-approved subject',

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55 D. Coates, 'Capitalist models and social democracy: the case of New Labour', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 3:3 (2001).

56 Coates, *Struggle*, vii–ix and 'Labour Governments', p. 64; Miliband, *Socialism*, pp. 90, 119, 228.

57 See in particular, H. Pelling, *The Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (1967) and *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968).

it was doing some of the things Harrison had called for in his 1990 reflection on the state of the discipline.[58]

If Pelling anticipated some of concerns and approaches of later historians, one of the more directly influential earlier voices belongs to Ross McKibbin. In work stretching back to the 1970s he directly linked Labour's historical progress to the social and political order in which the Party operated. In particular, McKibbin underlined the extent to which, for a variety of reasons, workers accepted established institutions, based as they were on a highly stratified social order. The moderation of the working class, counter-posed as it was by visceral opposition from the ruling elite, consequently bred within the Labour leadership an understandable – if sometimes exaggerated – caution when it came to policy innovation and electoral strategy.[59]

McKibbin's standpoint has been extensively developed in numerous studies of key moments in Labour's post-war history, in most of which Nick Tiratsoo has taken a leading part.[60] In these investigations, the institutional perspective so beloved of labour historians has been supplemented by a close appreciation of social history: in fact the Labour Party itself is viewed as being as much a social as a political institution. The vanguardism of earlier accounts has been discarded in favour of a more cautious appreciation of working-class potential: rather than casting radical minorities as the tip of a radical – if unaccountably moribund – iceberg, militants are presented as atypical and often isolated members of the proletariat. This view of working-class life, and the possibilities inherent to it, is based on the less class-centred view of social history outlined above. Some of the problems associated with Miliband's fairly abstract understanding of the Party's character have, moreover, been overcome by a much closer investigation of historical sources. Such empirical research has gone beyond the world of the Party leader or activist and highlighted the lives of 'ordinary' people and so exposed the uncertain place of labour movement 'politics' in the lives of the labouring majority.

Work informed by this outlook has stressed the severe economic problems faced by the Party when in government and assessed its record in that light. It has also suggested that if Labour was concerned to improve, rather than replace capitalism, ministers attempted to foster genuine economic change and at least adhered to policies that put workers' interests higher up the agenda than did their Conservative opponents.[61] Most crucially however adherents have problematised the Party's relationship with the working class in particular and the electorate

58 Harrison, 'Labour Party', p. 12.
59 See in particular, R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class. Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950,* (Oxford, 1991) and *Classes and Cultures. England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).
60 R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *The Wilson Governments, 1964–1970* (London, 1993); S. Fielding, P. Thompson and N. Tiratsoo, *'England Arise!' The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s* Britain (Manchester, 1995); N. Tiratsoo, (ed) *The Attlee Years* (London, 1991): N. Tiratsoo; *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry, 1945–1960* (London, 1990), '"Never had it so bad"?: Britain in the 1970s' in N. Tiratsoo (ed), *From Blitz to Blair. A New History of Britain Since 1939* (London, 1997) and 'Labour and the electorate' in Tanner N. Tiratsoo*, Labour's Century.*
61 J. Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy. The Attlee Years, 1945–1951* (Cambridge, 1997) and 'Labour and the Economy' in Tanner, N. Tiratsoo, *Labour's Century.*

in general. Thus, even during Labour's supposed 'rise', the Party is presented as having to negotiate with parochial political cultures, few of which were immediately hospitable to its message.[62] The need to take due regard of the appeal of Labour's Liberal and especially Conservative rivals has also been fully recognised. It is striking how little earlier labour historians took working class Conservatism at all seriously. In particular, the limited political and social aspirations of most proletarian voters – even at apparently 'radical' moments such as the 1945 general election – has been stressed.[63] It has also been argued that Labour did its best to establish a more than electoral relationship with the working-class by promoting its own cultural institutions, albeit to little effect. In this Labour was not as deficient – comparatively speaking – as some have implied: both Labour and the SPD have been found wanting in building a 'hegemonic relationship' with supporters.[64] Work in this vein has also exposed the extent to which Labour activists often adhered to assumptions that only impeded the Party's electoral progress.[65]

In other words, adherents of the 'new' labour history, consider that, for the most part, it was not so much a lack of will – or agency – but more circumstances – that is structure – which prevented Labour from achieving more than it did. Most controversially, their central assertion is that it was the nature of the British working class – rather than the limitations of the Party leadership – that proved to be the most compelling factor in dictating Labour's trajectory. Vanguardist historians are naturally sceptical of this perspective and some have gone so far as to characterise it as constituting an 'Apathy School'. They have accused adherents of many failings, including an 'extraordinarily reduced view of politics', an 'unimaginative' – not to say incompetent – use of sources and an elemental ignorance of the last three decades of social history.[66] The emphasis on constraint has also been questioned by political scientists working in Miliband's shadow, for overlooking what they take to be the most compelling influence on Labour's past: the leadership's lack of ambition.[67]

More heat than light has been provoked by such often-intemperate critics as the debate, such as it is, has mixed up questions of methodology with those of interpretation and, most explosively, matters of personal political belief. That it has exposed what are essentially irresolvable political differences can be illustrated with reference to the supposed potential of the British working class. For, an important starting point of those emphasising the force of constraint on Labour's character take the limited ambition of most workers as an important influence. Paradoxically even Miliband accepted that the working class exhibited a profoundly non-rev-

62 Tanner, *Political Change*.
63 S. Fielding, 'What did „The People" want? The meaning of the 1945 general election', *Historical Journal*, 35:3 (1992).
64 S. Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 139–144.
65 S. Fielding, 'Activists against "affluence": Labour Party culture during the "Golden Age", c. 1950–1970', *Journal of British Studies,* 40:2 (2001).
66 Hinton, 'Apathy'; G. Eley, 'Socialism by any other name? Illusions and renewal in the history of the Western European Left', *New Left Review*, 227 (1998), pp. 109–110.
67 Bale, 'No alternative'.

olutionary temper. However, he considered this to be a product of Labour's own lack of radicalism: bereft of leaders who wanted substantial economic change, no wonder workers felt there was little alternative to capitalism.[68] Thus, on the one hand working-class conservatism is thought to have produced Labour moderation; on the other, the Party's caution is believed to have created workers antipathetic to socialism. It is striking how far this academic difference of opinion actually proceeds from arguments over electoral strategy long familiar to Labour members as for decades left and right have debated the relative merits of 'accommodating' or 'shaping' voters' preferences.[69]

Conclusion

Another reason for the hostility directed at the 'new' labour history is that its emergence coincided with the rise of 'New' Labour; and a few leftists critics appeared to imagine adherents of the former sympathised with the latter. As noted above, there was some correspondence between the vanguardism of labour historians and the radicalisation of Party activists that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. In a similar way, the greater awareness of the historical lack of radical class sentiment and the constraints that beset the Labour leadership emerged in the wake of the Party's declining electoral powers in the 1980s. Developments in historiography should not however be seen as simply reflecting the course of contemporary events: vanguardism was evident during Gaitskell's leadership while some of Pelling's most interesting work was published in the late 1960s. However, the shift from accounts stressing the potential for radical change to those that focussed on influences militating against major transformation was certainly striking.

To some extent critics of the 'new' labour history were right to point to a connection between its appearance and that of 'New' Labour, for the former is better able to explain the latter than most other forms of analysis. For, it embraces a greater regard for the dilemmas of those who formed the Labour leadership and, by implication, more of an interest in the revisionist perspective that contributed so much to its outlook. In contrast, those who emphasised the importance of militant vanguards or viewed Labour's leaders through Miliband's eyes either paid them no heed or considered them antagonistic to the 'real' labour movement. As a result, arguments put by the likes of Blair and Brown that emphasised the electoral and economic imperatives behind policy change are not in principle disregarded and can be seen as part of a long-standing attempt on the part of the leadership to engage with British society. That so many of those wavering Conservative voters Blair had to persuade to support his Party were, by any measure, members of the working class, would have struck 'new' labour historians as nothing novel.

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68 Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, pp. 90, 119, 228.
69 For more on this, see Fielding, '*New' Labour*, pp. 85–93.

Moreover, Blair and Brown's attempt to relate 'New' Labour to the Party's past also revealed a significant historiographical point with which 'new' labour historians would be inclined to agree. They cast collectivism as well as the institutions of the labour movement as being themselves merely means to an end. Rather than seeing collective struggle and endeavour as good in themselves Blair and Brown saw them as expressions of the instrumental individualism of the working class, the means of their own individual self-improvement and advancement. The extent to which the labour movement will prove to be – like state ownership – but the time-bound means of advancing those interests remains to be seen. 'New' Labour does not necessarily mean however that the history of the Labour Party has come to an end. That so many appear to think it does says more about their flawed perception of events than the nature of change within the Party. Labour historians are not the only ones to have got this question wrong, although their failure should worry those concerned for the future relevance of labour history as much as for the Labour Party itself.