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Review

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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Anthony Painter, *Left Without a Future? Social Justice in Anxious Times*, London: I.B.Tauris for Policy Network, 2013, 244 pp. (pbk).

Why have social democrats failed to make political gains from the greatest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s? Alongside electoral defeats to established conservative parties are challenges from new populist movements to the left (e.g. Occupy) and the Right (e.g. UKIP). The British Labour Party was roundly rejected in 2010 and then engaged in an interminable, introspective leadership election. Meanwhile, the new Conservative led Coalition achieved the astonishing discursive feat of pinning the blame for the Great Recession on Labour economic profligacy. This will perhaps go down as one of the most extraordinary tactical and strategic defeats in British political history. Ever since, Labour has been on the back foot in trying to develop a new political narrative. In 2014 the Party is nowhere near where it should be in the polls, despite there being no love for a Coalition that is both deeply ideological and incompetent in its pursuit of 'austerity'.

To his credit, Labour Leader Ed Miliband has been gradually crafting a narrative based on a critique of 'irresponsible' or 'predatory' capitalism, allied to a more positive, inclusive formulation of 'One Nation'. The sense is that Miliband has done this incrementally and pragmatically. There has been no explicit attempt to import a broader intellectual blueprint for campaigning and governing, such as New Labour's Third Way. This may say more about the paucity of the intellectual resources available to Miliband, rather than his own preferences or abilities. Attempts to intellectually renew Labour post 2010 have taken two main forms. The first, unsurprising given the economic context, has been a return to the solid social democratic business of political economy and institutional design. This has been evident in work on, for example, (re)regulation, or pre-distribution. The second, higher profile type of intervention, has returned to what are imagined to be Labour's true values. At the forefront has been so called Blue Labour. Influential upon Miliband and associated with Labour peer Maurice Glasman and others, it places a communitarian emphasis on 'family, faith and flag' as a means of challenging both market and state fundamentalism. What has been lacking is an attempt to link such institutional and value-based approaches to the sociological character of post-crash Britain, and its implications for political strategy. It is into this vacuum that political writer Anthony Painter has tried to position himself in *Left Without a Future?*

The scope and rather breathless style of the book makes it difficult to characterise in sum. The first, stronger half, contains a series of chapters that diagnose the weaknesses of the post-crash left, offer some (pseudo) sociological commentary on the shape of a complex British society and what this entails for a new political economy. There is also a – now quite timely – chapter devoted to characterising different culturalist approaches to 'England and Scotland'. The second half drifts into overreach and occasional incoherence, with speculative, journalistic forays through a host of ideas – both faddish and traditional – and observations on party organisation and leadership. An unwelcome feature is Painter's uncritical acceptance of

political- psychological and neuroscientific theories that have been influential in recent years: making these the platform from which political ‘truths’ are read is in fact the antithesis of the pluralist politics he calls for.

To the extent that there is an integrating argument, it seems to be that the social democratic left must accept the irreducible pluralism of contemporary societies; move firmly away from the command and control, regulatory, redistributive state; and return to successful institution building, now to include local economic institutions. Painter adds – in a useful schematic of current ideological positions in British party politics – that while the new ‘moralising’ and ‘localising’ tendencies on left and right (e.g. Blue Labour, Red Tory) may be useful for developing the now requisite cultural politics, they are out of step with social complexity and citizen indifference. The Labour Party needs to open out to a diverse society beyond ‘the converted’; political leadership needs to be firm and strategic, but also humble, accessible and non-hectoring. Painter is also an observer of US politics and clearly impressed by much of the Obama template.

There is a good deal in here which will resonate with moderate social democrats, and could push at new thinking on policy and organisation. Few on the centre-left would disagree with Painter’s clear analysis of the limits of the pre-crash economic model (although many might take issue with his dismissal of the problem of relative inequality). The focus on institution building is also a suggestive social democratic strategy, although the specifics (e.g. local ‘work associations’) are surprisingly retro and underdeveloped. Painter also draws on his own previous research to map some interesting ideal-types of attitudes among the contemporary electorate, and he is surely right to try and indicate what this means for the leadership and political organisation of a traditional institution like Labour.

However, for all this, there are some profound analytical and political weaknesses to the argument. The first is a curious paradox: while the book presents itself as a sociological analysis of the current political scene, much of it reads like an over-excited *Demos* pamphlet circa 1995. There is a casual acceptance of what (in actual sociology) is referred to as the ‘death of class’ thesis, endless references to complexity, ‘bubbles’, ‘tribes’ and a fetishisation of ‘networks’ and the role of new technologies. We are told that people are more individualist, and less politically partisan. Most of this is established by assertion rather than with meaningful reference to the voluminous empirical or theoretical sociological literature. In the face of this, Painter points to ‘outdated’ ideologies on the statist left and neoliberal right, and argues for a more dialogical approach to politics. Fine. Much of this remains important, if contested. But new? It is indeed time that the sociological dynamics of the post-crash world were mapped, with a view to elaborating their political implications. So it was strange to read a description of Britain that, with the possible exception of the rise of social media, looks strikingly similar to that imagined by think-tanks in the 1990s. This work has been done, over and over. It is safe to say that we have known that ‘The simple fact is that European societies have changed from the social democratic golden years after the desperate tragedy of the two world wars’ for some considerable time (p.222). If anything, we should be considering the possible *re-emergence* of more ‘traditional’ forms of social structure and political practice, in the face of years of recession and the reversal of social mobility.

Of course, the other thing that has ‘happened’ to Britain since the 1990s is 13 years of New Labour government. But the second bizarre feature of the book is that it is as if New Labour never, in fact, happened. The target of Painter’s critique is the statist, Keynesian social

democratic left, and the current neoliberal right (just as it was for Third Way thinkers in the mid-1990s). But he offers no appraisal or account of the historical impact of New Labour itself. Something called 'the left' is blamed for failing to deliver an alternative to the neoliberal crash. But it could be reasonably countered that New Labour self-consciously defeated the left, and then proceeded, for all its important progressive achievements, to embed and extend neoliberal hegemony. Painter completely fails to acknowledge the role of three successive New Labour governments in shaping the very 'social realities' he now describes as circumscribing political action. We can argue over the extent to which New Labour was more or less neoliberal, social democratic, a hybrid or whatever. But any serious account of the contemporary political scene must at least stake out a position on this issue. It is as if Painter mirrors the current Labour Party's own discomfort and failure to situate itself clearly in relation to the Blair years. An explicit reckoning of this type by the leadership post 2010 would have lessened the impact of ludicrous claims about Labour's record made daily by Coalition ministers and their media supporters.

This failure to adequately conceptualise how social change is itself shot through with politics, combined with confusion and/or myopia about the impact of the Blair/Brown years, ripples into Painter's analysis of political leadership and strategy. He offers a quite thoughtful account of some of the dilemmas and complexities of contemporary leadership, but is contradictory about what it can achieve. On the one hand we see the classic, reductionist and implicitly technocratic social democratic approach: 'A viable and sustainable political strategy understands where the parameters are, then crafts a viable vision backed up by sound policies within those parameters' (p.52). However, elsewhere it is argued that 'The notion of 'centre-ground' as the magical 'sweet spot' of politics is outmoded...there are a number of available 'centres'' (p.34). The first view presents politics as a *fait accompli* in the face of social change, the latter holds out hope for 'game changing' political leadership. The ambiguity is reflected in the rather bland subsequent claims about what leadership should entail: basically a mix of 'passion' and 'realism'. There is no shame in conceding that leadership is caught between the poles of determinism (realism) and voluntarism (passion). But more rigour in thinking through the dynamics of that relationship would have enhanced the whole argument: where specifically in narrative and policy might there be more room for active leadership, and where must it defer to the constraints of its operating environment?

Painter's own, ultimate commitment to (a moderate version of) the Labour Party as *the* vehicle for change prevents him from really delivering on the implications of his analysis. Like many, I am sympathetic to his view that a more pluralist and outward looking Labour Party will be crucial to delivering any progressive change. But such a party must give far more credence to the radical critiques of our way of life that have been (re)emerging. These come from various dynamic and progressive quarters in the complex society that Painter depicts, such as Occupy or a vibrant new feminism. Engaging with these new actors and ideas specifically requires an end to the enduring, almost pathological need by moderate social democrats to rubbish 'the left': a tiresomely familiar feature of Painter's book. This is no better illustrated than in his silly and literalist critique of Occupy's claim to speak for 'the 99%' as being impossible in a pluralist society. Of course they are not actually claiming to speak 'for' 99% of citizens' individual views! The slogan simply indicates a fundamental critique of the balance of power and resources within the present social, economic and political system. This is a critique that resonates with popular sentiment more than Painter or moderate social

democrats still dare to admit. Ironically, it is also ripe to be popularised and mobilised by a bolder and re-invigorated centre-left, using precisely the blend of dialogic, passionate and realistic leadership that this book calls for.

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Christina L Davis, *Why Adjudicate?: Enforcing Trade Rules in the WTO*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 2012, xvi + 326 pp. (pbk).

Multilateral agreements have been subject to increasing scrutiny as the globalisation process has progressed because of their critical role in enforcing internationally-agreed rules on conduct by nation states. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has faced particular criticism over its perceived challenges to national sovereignty through adjudication, whereby the multilateral rules-based framework for trade has evolved through cumulative legal precedent without approval by member countries ('automaticity'). Nevertheless, WTO membership continues to increase and countries continue to seek adjudication on their trade disputes. *Why Adjudicate?* focuses on the political economy of WTO adjudication, asking when and why do nations choose the legal avenue for settling their (bilateral) trade disputes and how does the legal context affect the pattern of dispute settlement. The book argues that multilateral organisations, such as the WTO, provide a key forum for diplomatic intermediation between signatory countries and that requests for dispute adjudication send clear signals to both domestic political audiences and trade partners. Further, it demonstrates the important role of democratically accountable domestic political institutions in determining the use of adjudication to resolve trade disputes.

The Introduction addresses the context for adjudication by surveying the literature on the enforcement of international trade law, alternative strategies for resolving trade disputes (i.e., forum choice) and explanations for the pattern of use of adjudication – more than half of all disputes filed are settled prior to panel rulings. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between domestic politics and the desire for adjudication. The demand for adjudication is argued to be a function of legislative constraints and executive autonomy; adjudication represents a 'second best' solution occupying the middle ground between conflict and co-operation.

Chapter 3 analyses the demand for adjudication with respect to domestic democratic checks and balances incorporating a statistical analysis of GATT and WTO trade disputes for 81 countries over the thirty-year period 1975 to 2004. Alternative models are employed to test different aspects of the influence of domestic institutions on case filings by both plaintiff and defendant countries. Democratic states are more likely to file as well as to be defendants in disputes because of their domestic institutional checks and balances. This is in spite of (or because of) the presumed greater commitment of democratic states to trade openness and liberalisation. Dyadic analysis is used to test the propensity of major trade partners and political allies to engage in adjudication. 'Fighting between friends' is demonstrated to be significantly more likely, even allowing for trade flows, market size and income. These findings