

Getting back in the DeLorean

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Getting back in the DeLorean: Modernisation vs Anti-modernisation in Contemporary British Politics

Journal:	<i>Political Studies</i>
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Keywords:	Modernisation, Anti-Modernisation, UK party politics, Empty signifiers
Abstract:	<p>This paper sets out to highlight a growing clash between modernising and anti-modernising forces in the UK. Whilst previous scholarship has focussed on processes of party modernisation over the past three decades, little attention has been paid to the countervailing forces of anti-modernisation. Here, our argument is that modernisation processes have worked to produce a recent backlash from anti-modernising tendencies seeking to reassert various types of traditional values and practices. This backlash is evidenced across the political spectrum and can be cited as a factor in the recent rise in support for UKIP and, grassroots backing in the Labour Party for Jeremy Corbyn. Empirically, we show how this increasingly prevalent line of conflict is playing out within the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP, whilst theoretically, we argue that Ernesto Laclau's work on empty signifiers is useful in explaining the dynamic interplay between modernising and anti-modernising discourses.</p>

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Introduction

For three decades, much scholarly attention has been directed towards the analysis of ‘modernising’ tendencies within the two main UK political parties. In the case of Labour, a focus on internal party modernisation during the 1990s (Smith, 1994; Hay, 1999; Wickham-Jones, 1995; Heffernan, 2000) eventually extended to New Labour’s outward attempts to modernise the state, economy, society and the UK more generally (Finalyson, 2003). Similarly, since 2005, and David Cameron’s embarkation into his own party modernisation project, the discourse of modernisation, and assessments of its fate, has dominated the attention of Conservative party commentators (Dorey, 2007; Bale, 2008; Byrne et al, 2011). Yet, little detailed attention has been paid in the UK to the flip side of such modernising processes; the countervailing forces of anti-modernisation. In recent years, a growing body of evidence suggests that modernising forces have created their own backlash, not just in the UK, but more generally throughout Western Europe, and are being increasingly challenged by anti-modernising narratives directed towards a reassertion of various aspects of tradition and a nostalgia for the past. In Europe, these anti-modernisation tendencies have been cited as a key explanation for the ascendancy of populist right parties, whilst in Britain, they have been noted as a key factor in the electoral rise of UKIP (Ford & Goodwin, 2014) and, as we argue here, are further evidenced in more recent support for the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader.

As yet, the tension between modernisation and anti-modernisation, or traditionalism, in British politics remains generally overlooked and, as we argue here, sometimes misunderstood. Where it has been noted, is in relation to the Conservative party, where conflicts between traditionalists and modernisers have been identified as the key basis of Conservative party splits and, more recently, defections to UKIP. In the European context, the conflict between modernisation and anti-modernisation has been dealt with in greater detail, with a negative response to modernisation being noted as a key variable in driving support for the populist radical right. Indeed, some scholars argue that an opposition to modernisation represents one element of the emergence of new political cleavages across Western Europe (Kreisi *et al*, 2006); cleavages which are shaped by the impact of globalisation with its attendant ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

Our aim here is to bridge some of these literatures and examine the role which the clash between modernisation and anti-modernisation has played in structuring party competition in the UK. Our approach is theoretically driven rather than quantitative; however, the analysis draws upon existing quantitative and qualitative studies of electoral change and party competition. Our argument divides as follows. Firstly, we contend that a clash between modernising and anti-modernising forces should be viewed as an increasingly prevalent line of political conflict with a growing relevance in explaining both inter and intra party competition in the UK. Secondly, this line of conflict structuring political competition is not confined to the right of the political spectrum as some literature implies; rather, it has as much potential to explain the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in Labour as it does the increase in support for UKIP. Thirdly, much of the existing

literature too readily depicts modernisation and traditionalism as static, fixed political alignments; in response, our aim is to show that these positions have a more fluid and relational character, helping to condition and shape the emergence of each other in such a way that allows political actors to sometimes move from one to the other to vie for competitive advantage. Fourthly, we argue that, in this relational sense, both should be viewed as performing the function in discourse of Ernesto Laclau's 'empty signifiers'. As empty signifiers, these discourses have come to play three key political functions: 1) they are being increasingly used to mobilise voters; 2) they work to construct the identity and demands of such voters; 3) they help to create a social antagonism which attempts to depoliticise or naturalise particular policy agendas.

The Modernisation Zeitgeist

The discourse of modernisation has come to define the contemporary era of UK party politics (Byrne *et al*, 2011). Since the 1960s, it has underpinned various governmental projects, from the first Wilson administration's attempts to harness the 'white heat of technology' to the Thatcher governments' efforts to overhaul the putatively social democratic postwar regime. Its more contemporary usage is epitomised in the Labour party's attempts during the 1980s and 1990s to adapt towards what it perceived as the modern realities of neo-liberal globalisation (Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2000). Portrayed as an inescapable response to such realities, Labour's modernisation project started as an exercise in internal party restructuring and rebranding before extending outwards towards innumerable attempts to modernise British society writ large (Finlayson, 2003). With a lesser degree of scope, the discourse of modernisation has more recently been seized upon by David Cameron who, following his election as Conservative party leader in 2005, embarked on his own modernisation drive to address the party's electoral problems in the wake of the New Labour project. As is often noted, both parties' modernisations have involved a number of shared elements, including: organisational change; policy change; image rebranding; a putative move to the centre; a distancing of the party from its past; and most importantly, an accommodation of the party towards what its leadership perceived to be 'modern' conditions (for eg, Bale, 2008; Dorey, 2007; Byrne *et al*, 2011; Dommett, 2015).

As a result, a great deal of scholarly focus has been directed towards understanding such processes of modernisation. Within this literature, a broad consensus emerged over the defining features of Labour's modernisation project. These were taken to include commitments towards: Third Way ideas; globalisation; marketisation; multi-level governance; social justice; multiculturalism; social pluralism; freedom of information; ethical foreign policy; and, constitutional reform. Nevertheless, some debate emerged over how to interpret these changes. Scholars divided over whether this modernising direction represented continuity with Labour's reformist traditions (Smith, 1994), a more fundamental rejuvenation of social democracy (Giddens, 2007), a capitulation to neo-liberalism (Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2000) or a combination of such elements (Driver & Martell, 1998; Hall, 2007). Since 2005, Conservative party scholars

have similarly highlighted the defining features of David Cameron’s modernisation drive. These have been noted to include commitments towards: Big Society ideas; social liberalism and equal marriage; social justice; environmentalism; a quality of life agenda; feminisation of the party; EU reform; liberal foreign policy and, limited constitutional reform. Again, some debate exists over whether this signals a turn towards a more socially liberal or compassionate form of Conservatism (Dorey, 2007; Beech, 2011), an accommodation towards New Labour (McAnulla, 2010) or a revised form of Thatcherite neo-liberalism (Kerr *et al*, 2011). Nevertheless, a strong theme that unites much of this literature is the sense that the Tories modernisation project has been less substantial than its New Labour counterpart. As such, it has tended to be more easily blown off course, and should be viewed as a relatively more precarious and unsuccessful attempt at party adaptation (Hayton & McEnHill, 2015; Dommett, 2015; Kerr & Hayton, 2015).

Anti-Modernisation Backlash and Populist Zeitgeist

At the heart of such literature is a recognition that both Labour and the Conservatives, alongside other mainstream parties across Europe, have attempted to align themselves with broader social, political and economic changes perceived to have taken place at the national and international levels (Dommett, 2015). In particular, they have sought to bring themselves into step with wider forces of modernisation which work toward greater political, economic and cultural integration. However, in recent years it has also been increasingly noted that these types of modernising tendencies have created a backlash and worked to alienate elements of the mainstream parties’ memberships and core voters. In a comparative context, it is widely recognised that social changes perceived as synonymous with modernisation, such as increased global integration, migration and multiculturalism, have helped to constitute groups which are variously referred to within the literature as ‘modernisation losers’ (Pelinka, 2013), ‘globalisation losers’ (Kriesi et al, 2006) or, in a British context, the ‘left behind’ (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). The composition of such groups is sometimes disputed, with some emphasising their mainly working class, blue collar character (Pelinka, 2013; Ford & Goodwin, 2014) and others pointing to their more heterogeneous make-up (Kriesi et al, 2006; Evans & Mellon, 2015). What all agree on, is that these groups have become alienated from the mainstream political centre and are acting as a key driver of a ‘populist zeitgeist’ across Europe (Mudde, 2004) as they become drawn towards mainly right-wing parties utilising traditionalist discourses which promise to restore values and practices perceived to have been displaced by modernisation. These emergent populist right parties are noted to have developed a type of ‘counter revolution’ (Ignazi, 1992), in their response to modernisation, as they seek to promote a programmatic appeal around ‘the preservation of the status quo ante - as it was before mass migration, Europeanisation and globalisation started to challenge the nation state’ (Pelinka, 2013).

These developments are linked to a broader restructuring of the traditional lines of political competition across Europe. Over the postwar period, long-established economic and religious voting patterns are noted to have been eroded by developments such as the expansion of

education, rising living standards, secularisation and value changes associated with the 'liberalising' impact of new social movements pushing for extensions to civil rights. Such changes are argued to have triggered a realignment of citizens around new cultural and identity issues shaped by the social transformations that have occurred since the 1960s (for eg, Dalton et al, 1984; Inglehart, 1990; Franklin et al, 1992; Kitschelt, 1994d). In light of these, a new type of two dimensional political space has developed in which traditional economic and distributional concerns now intersect with new cultural conflicts between social liberals or libertarians, on the one hand, and those who defend more traditional authoritarian values on the other. In much of this literature, it is often argued that, the postwar period has brought a shift in the relative salience of economic versus cultural issues, to the extent that cultural issues, such as disputes over immigration and civil rights, now often supercede economic ones.

In recent literature, some studies assert that this realignment of the two dimensional political space, initially triggered by the impact of trends such as liberalisation, the rise of feminism and the extension of civil rights, is in the process of being further transformed by developments more specifically associated with 'modernisation'; most notably increased economic and cultural integration triggered by globalisation and new migration patterns (Kriesi et al, 2006; Bornschier, 2010). For eg, as Dolezal (2010: 356) notes:

the decline of national sovereignty, the increasing cultural heterogeneity of European societies as a consequence of mass immigration, and the combined forces of a globalised and neo-liberal economy might be conceived of as a new critical juncture leading to new structural alignments in European electorates.

For such authors, the twin processes of economic and cultural modernisation are working to open up new structural conflicts between the various groups of 'winners' and 'losers' they help to create. According to Bornschier (2010: p 421): 'As a result of these evolutions certain social groups have lost in terms of life-chances or privileges, while others feel threatened in their identity by the policies enacting universalistic values and by European integration'. This, in turn, has opened up new potentials for political mobilisation within national political spaces; potentials which have been seized upon by both mainstream parties on the 'modernising' side and populist right parties which seek to preserve former values and practices on the 'traditionalist' side.

Such literatures bring to light growing clashes, throughout Europe, between social and political forces often broadly classified as 'modernising' and those resisting such forces with reactionary, anti-modernising agendas which oppose certain interpretations of the 'modern' and appeal to more traditional values and the restoration of past practices. However, these conflicts are not always presented explicitly as an emerging clash between modernisation and anti-modernisation per se. Rather, we see these conflicts expressed variously throughout the literature. For eg, Kriesi et al (2006) refer to new structural conflicts emerging between *integrationists* and

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demarcationists; ie, those who support greater denationalisation and cultural pluralism on one side and those who support protectionism and a defence of tradition on the other. Alternatively, Bonschier (2010) locates growing clashes between *libertarian-universalist* and *traditionalist-communitarian* forces at either end of the cultural pole of the two dimensional political axis. In a British context, Wheatley (2015) highlights a growing *cosmopolitan* vs *communitarian* clash which he argues can help explain the recent surge in support for UKIP, whilst more broadly Zizek (2006) argues that recent clashes in Europe are structured around conflicts between the *Anglo-Saxon model* of the economic modernisers, on one side, and those who seek to defend the traditional *French-German model* of the old Europe on the other. As such, there exists a reasonable amount of conceptual fuzziness in relation to how we can best characterise these conflicts.

In the midst of this lack of clarity, we argue that it is useful to utilise the broader terms of modernisation vs anti-modernisation. In doing so, we emphasise that modernisation has become the dominant form of discourse most commonly employed to homogenise a diverse, and sometimes contradictory, array of developments which have helped to structure political competition and mobilise voters, since the 1960s, but much more explicitly since the 1990s. These developments are broadly seen to include both economic and cultural elements. On the economic level, modernisation has come to include such elements as globalisation, neo-liberalism, marketisation and, commitments towards social justice; whilst on the cultural level, modernisation refers to broad elements such as universalism, social diversity, multiculturalism and liberalisation. These are the types of developments which mainstream parties have been keen to align themselves with through the deployment of modernisation discourses (Dommett, 2015). However, in light of these developments, a number of social forces have more recently began to coalesce around discourses which are becoming increasingly homogenised as ‘anti-modernising’ in their character. Here, the prefix ‘anti’ is important to our argument, in that these forces are widely perceived to be reactionary and defensive against the developments broadly characterised as modernisation. In their empirical content, these revolve around the rejection of many (though not always all) aspects of modernisation, and the evocation of ideas of tradition and a nostalgia for past values and practices.

Modernisation vs Anti-Modernisation in the UK

To date, little attention has been directed towards how such clashes have manifested themselves in the UK. This is perhaps understandable. Until recently, the UK party system has been immune to the impact of successful populist right parties, though this should probably be viewed as a supply, rather than a demand side problem (John & Margetts, 2009). As such, conflicts between modernising and anti-modernising forces have been muted in the UK, with the result that scholarly focus has generally been directed towards understanding modernisation rather than anti-modernisation. One area where studies have noted conflict is in relation to the intra-party dynamics of the Conservative Party, where a clash between modernisers and traditionalists has

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3 long been seen as the key source of party divisions. It is only recently that a backlash against
4 modernisation has been viewed as a driver of inter-party conflict, with both Conservative and
5 Labour party modernisations having been noted to have played a key role in fuelling support for
6 UKIP (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, 2015; Evans & Mellon, 2015). Here, we add to such claims with
7 our argument that tensions between modernising and anti-modernising forces in the UK have not
8 been confined to the political right; they have also evidenced themselves in the recent divisions
9 within the Labour party around Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 successful leadership bid. It is from such
10 evidence that we develop our key argument below - that a growing clash between modernisation
11 and anti-modernisation is becoming a more prevalent line of both intra and inter-party
12 competition in the UK. Below, we take a brief look at how such conflicts have played out in
13 relation to the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP respectively.

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22 A tension between 'centrist' modernisers and centre-right traditionalists has long been a key
23 source of division within the Conservative party. This clash has been particularly prevalent in the
24 wake of the Thatcher governments and the source of a number of party management problems.
25 On one side, the traditionalists look towards further embedding Thatcherite reforms, whilst
26 placing strong emphasis on issues of law and order, immigration control, welfare retrenchment,
27 traditional family values, national sovereignty and strong Euroscepticism. On the other side, the
28 modernisers take inspiration from one nation and social liberal ideas and have sought in recent
29 years to reform the party's image as a 'nasty' party, appealing to a more compassionate and
30 inclusive form of Conservatism. Although both sides commit to limiting the size of the state, the
31 modernisers tend to favour a slightly more expansive role for government on issues around
32 inequality and economic development. In recent years, the traditionalists have tended to hold the
33 upper hand in the party, and the close association they bring to the legacy of the Thatcher
34 governments has helped to earn the party a reputation for failing to represent vulnerable and
35 minority groups. In turn, this prompted, under the respective leaderships of William Hague, Iain
36 Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, successive but failed attempts to modernise and
37 decontaminate the party's brand (see for eg: Denham & O'Hara, 2007; Bale, 2011).

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45 In the wake of the New Labour project, the task for the modernisers has been to pull the party
46 away from an over-reliance on a core vote strategy, based around a primary emphasis on anti-
47 immigration, law and order and state retrenchment. To date, this has been a seemingly staccato
48 process and it was not until the election of David Cameron as party leader, that the modernisers
49 appeared to gain any type of ascendancy or momentum. Central to Cameron's strategy has been
50 an attempt to align the party with key elements of Labour's modernising project (McAnulla,
51 2010), such as a greater emphasis on social justice and social pluralism; the latter of which was
52 exemplified by his commitment towards equal marriage legislation and the furthering of attempts
53 to increase the representation of women within the party. As well as a change to the party's logo
54 and early attempts to lower the salience of issues around immigration (Bale & Partos, 2015) and

Europe (Lynch, 2015), other symbolic moves towards signalling the party's modernising ethos have included an emphasis on environmental protection (Carter & Clements, 2015) and a commitment, thus far sustained, towards ring-fencing budgets for international aid and development.

Cameron's strategy has been to bring the party into line with what are perceived to be 'modern' conditions, values and practices (Dommett, 2015). In doing so, much effort has been directed towards aligning the party with the cultural aspects of modernisation; ie, those elements which include increasing diversity, integration and social pluralism. A central pillar of this strategy was the strong push for the full legal recognition of gay marriage, a key issue in provoking fierce conflict with traditionalists (Heppell, 2013). On the economic aspects of modernisation, the Conservatives have for a long time been aligned with key elements of economic modernisation, such as support for deregulation, marketisation and financialisation. Nevertheless, Cameron has attempted to further modernise the party's image on the economic side by focussing on two main fronts. Firstly, he has attempted to bolster public confidence in the Tories' ability to protect public services (Smith & Jones, 2015) and secondly, he has attempted to improve the party's image in relation to the issue of social justice. This latter theme has long been a missing element to the Conservatives' modernising credentials and both Cameron and his Chancellor George Osborne have directed much of their efforts towards addressing this by reassuring voters that the party can be trusted around issues of poverty and inequality.

Yet, the overall fate of Cameron's modernisation remains to be seen. Having hit the ground running with a series of symbolic moves signalling a strong departure from the party's traditionalist core vote strategy, Cameron's modernising momentum began to falter after 2007 in the wake of the financial crisis. Since then, his modernisation project has been beset with various problems, including some serious party divisions, confused objectives and a seeming lack of strong political leadership (Kerr & Hayton, 2015). At worst, the success of Cameron's modernisation remains in the balance, whilst at best it has arguably received some limited renewal in the wake of the party's success in the 2015 General Election. Important though, is the very strong reaction which the leader's modernisation agenda has provoked from within both the party itself and key elements of its wider support. Far from securing a dominant hold, Cameron's modernisation strategy has served to strengthen often fierce opposition from traditionalists and core voters, particularly since around 2007 and the onset of global economic downturn. This has led to continual pressure on Cameron to take tougher and more traditionalist stances on issues such as Europe and immigration. Even on other issues which were previously dominated by the modernisers, Cameron has been forced to either defend his stand against some aggressively traditionalist opposition, as in the case of equal marriage, or beat a hasty retreat onto more traditionalist ground, as in for eg, social policy, where Cameron's former, more compassionate rhetoric has given way to some stringent welfare reforms (Hayton & McEnhill, 2015). Similarly, on the issue of the environment, his modernising pledge to deliver the 'greenest government ever' has largely given way to a discourse of 'get rid of all the green crap' and commitments

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3 towards allowing ‘fracking’ and the construction of HS2 (Carter & Clements, 2015). Likewise,
4 the PM’s pledges to restore public confidence in the party’s commitment to public services has
5 been accompanied by some of the most stringent and successful attempts ever to radically reduce
6 the size and role of the state (Smith & Jones, 2015). In addition, his attempted ‘feminisation’ of
7 the party has largely failed to alter the party’s core commitment to more traditional gender norms
8 and family values (Childs and Campbell, 2015).
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12 In light of this, it is generally noted that Cameron’s efforts to modernise the party have merely
13 served to reanimate long-standing conflicts between traditionalists and modernisers, and in many
14 of these conflicts, the traditionalists may still retain much of the higher ground. Whilst
15 opposition to modernisation initially appeared reasonably muted from 2005 - 2007, fresh impetus
16 to these conflicts came as the party considered its response to the financial crisis, whilst
17 Cameron’s subsequent failure to deliver an overall majority in the 2010 general election brought
18 tensions to a height. Since then, a sustained backlash against the leader’s modernisation drive has
19 been widely evident from within the party and has also been noted to have increased electoral
20 support for UKIP, with a number of Conservative voters deserting the party in various elections
21 up to, and including, the 2015 General Election (Hayton, 2010; Webb & Bale, 2014).
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27 *Labour*

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29 In Labour, clashes between modernisers and traditionalists have been, until recently, subdued by
30 the modernisers, who achieved dominance following the splits, conflicts and expulsions that
31 animated the party’s internal politics throughout the 1980s. In the context of such divisions,
32 Labour’s modernisation drive, initiated by Neil Kinnock, was a lengthy, antagonistic process
33 lasting for over a decade. A key aim of the modernisers was to expunge the party of its deep
34 nostalgia for the past (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010), whilst asserting that their own forward-
35 looking, modernising outlook represented the true spirit of Labour’s historical trajectory
36 (Finlayson, 2003; Randall, 2009). As the modernisation project increased momentum under the
37 leadership of John Smith and came to full fruition under Tony Blair, it achieved a near
38 hegemony for the modernisers and a central role for modernisation discourses in New Labour’s
39 governing agenda. In light of this, the Tories modernisation drive, which has largely faltered in
40 the face of traditionalist opposition, looks like a pale reflection of its New Labour counterpart.
41 This is perhaps no surprise, since the term modernisation has been linked more closely to the
42 liberal left, whilst traditionalism has largely remained in the preserve of the right. Thus, just as
43 traditionalism has tended to hold sway in the Conservative party, modernisation has become
44 more synonymous with Labour; a development which had started to take root even before the
45 leadership of Kinnock (Finlayson, 2003).
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54 It is perhaps unsurprising then, that left parties such as Labour, have been cited as a key trigger
55 for traditionalist backlashes against modernisation, with anti-modernising forces often
56 interpreted as reacting against either the progressive social impact of the New Left since the
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3 1960s or, paradoxically, the accommodation of social democratic parties to neo-liberalism since
4 the 1980s (Marsdal, 2013). This latter trend has undermined left parties' ability to mobilise
5 traditional working class voters and exposed these voters to the mobilising effects of the right.
6 Thus, a growing neo-liberal consensus amongst Europe's political elites is argued to have
7 destabilised working class voters' left-right compass by de-politicising macro-economic policy
8 and closing debates over key economic issues that are important to working class voters (Evans
9 & Tilley, 2012). This has created space for the populist right to place a heightened focus on
10 'value politics', by increasing the salience of issues around immigration and law and order etc.
11 Linked to the left's movement towards a neo-liberal economic consensus is also the broader
12 accommodation of the metropolitan elites towards a cultural consensus around liberal
13 cosmopolitanism which is said to favour middle class voters and further undermine the interests
14 of the social democratic parties' traditional support (Ford & Goodwin, 2014).

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21 There is now recent evidence to suggest that similar types of dynamics are playing out in the UK,
22 with the Labour party's drift towards neo-liberal convergence having been noted as a key trigger
23 for rising disaffection amongst working class voters, driving many towards support for UKIP.
24 For eg, Evans & Melon (2015: 10) locate the leakage of Labour support precisely in its
25 modernisation process: 'the damage to Labour's core support had already been done by New
26 Labour's focus on a pro-middle class, pro-EU and, as it eventually turned out, pro-immigration
27 agenda, before the arrival of UKIP as a plausible electoral choice'. But, importantly, it is not just
28 inter-party dynamics that this anti-modernisation backlash has worked to create; more recent
29 years have seen a growing reaction against Labour modernisers from within the party itself,
30 where an attachment to nostalgia and tradition had been quietened but never fully expunged by
31 the New Labour project (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010). For eg, there were faint echoes of
32 modernisers vs traditionalists in the split between Blairites and Brownites; though given Gordon
33 Brown's role as a key architect in the Blair project, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to this
34 clash as a tension between modernisers and modernisers-lite. Similarly, the victory of Ed
35 Miliband over his brother David in Labour's 2010 leadership contest, which had strong support
36 amongst the affiliated trades unions, also signalled to some degree, an emerging backlash against
37 the Blairite, New Labour project. However, it is with the general election defeat of 2015, and the
38 emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader, that we've seen a heightened reignition of a more
39 fundamental clash between party modernisers and its traditionalist grassroots base.

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48 Whilst embracing most of the key elements of cultural modernisation, including the drift towards
49 cultural integration, social pluralism and liberalisation, Corbyn's rhetoric has been directed more
50 specifically towards an opposition to key aspects of economic modernisation, particularly those
51 elements of neoliberalism, deregulation and financialisation that have accompanied the spread of
52 globalisation. In their opposition to 'Blairite' economic modernisation, the Corbynites present
53 themselves as standing in defence of what they regard as the party's traditional core values of
54 social justice, redistribution, public ownership and state-led growth. In addition, they also
55 promise to strengthen the party's affiliation with its traditional blue collar and multicultural
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support base by promising to reconnect the party to its grassroots supporters and trades union affiliates. A further element to Corbyn's opposition to modernising trends is a forceful rejection of modern methods of political communication and spin, the introduction of which was a key element of Labour's modernisation project (Finlayson, 2003). Thus, the leader has emphasised his commitment to processes of democratisation, consultation and consensus building.

As such, the key spur for the groundswell of support for Corbyn has been a forceful reaction against the direction the modernisers have taken the party. To both Corbyn's supporters and critics alike, the Labour leader's position is entrenched in the anti-modernising camp, and is rooted in the more traditional politics of 'old' Labour. This has led many critics to dismiss the Corbynites as wanting to turn 'back the clock' towards a largely discredited past, before the era of modernisation. This was perhaps best exemplified by David Cameron, who at PMQs on the 21st October 2015 - the so called 'Back to the Future Day' - remarked: 'I am not surprised that many people sitting behind him say he should get in his DeLorean and go back to 1985 and stay there'. Indeed, this vein of criticism, that Corbyn the traditionalist, needs to reconnect the party with modern 'realities', is one, which as we argue below, has long been used by the modernisers to marginalise both internal and external opposition. However, the important point here is that, whereas such depoliticising discourse worked effectively to stymie opposition throughout the 1990s and 2000s, it appears to have lost some of its efficacy in the light of an increasingly assertive backlash from the party's traditionalist wing.

UKIP

The recent surge in electoral support for UKIP has been one of the most notable developments in contemporary UK party politics. The idea that UKIP attracts much of its support from voters who feel alienated by the modernising tendencies of the two main parties is central to much of the current literature. In particular, Ford & Goodwin (2014) argue that the surge in UKIP support has been driven by a general feeling of disaffection amongst mainly older, white, working class and low skilled voters, towards the parties' convergence around key elements of both Labour and Conservative party modernisations. This, combined with wider economic and social transformations, particularly those that have brought greater cultural and economic integration, has helped to establish a group of voters who feel alienated by the liberal cosmopolitanism of the Westminster elite. These 'left-behind' voters share broadly similar characteristics to those groups referred to within the comparative literature as modernisation or globalisation 'losers'. According to such literature, it is mainly anti-establishment, populist right parties, such as UKIP, that have become the key beneficiaries of these groups' backlash against modernising and globalising tendencies.

Ford and Goodwin's work has been hugely influential in helping us to interpret, not only the dynamics of support for UKIP, but also some of the ways in which electoral competition in the UK has shifted more broadly. It points towards the mainstream parties' close alignment with

wider modernising tendencies as having helped to create the potential for a type of ‘anti-politics’ (Stoker, 2006), in the form of voters who are disenchanted and ripe for mobilisation against political and cultural elites. This opening of fertile ground for populist, anti-establishment parties, although common in Europe, represents a significant transformation of the electoral landscape in the UK. Importantly, the bulk of empirical work in this area emphasises that an electoral appeal towards traditional values and practices and a nostalgia for the past has helped to solidify this transformation. However, whilst Ford and Goodwin’s work has attracted much praise, it has also been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the working-class basis of UKIP’s support. According to Evans and Mellon (2015), UKIP draws as much support from middle class voters, particularly those who are self employed and small business owners. This chimes with some of the comparative literature which asserts that those groups most likely to feel threatened by modernisation are heterogeneous in their composition (Kriesi et al, 2006). Yet, despite this level of disagreement, most authors agree that much of UKIP’s vote comes from voters who were alienated years before the emergence of UKIP as a political force, and specifically, by both parties’ realignment towards a ‘liberal consensus’ on issues such as the EU and immigration.

Such literature locates UKIP’s support in a mixture of traditional, working class Labour voters and petit-bourgeois or middle class Conservative voters, who feel shared grievances at the mainstream parties’ convergence around issues broadly associated with modernisation. Whilst the movement of past Labour voters to the right does not necessarily point to a weakening of class identity, it does potentially demonstrate a shift from economic to cultural voting patterns in an environment in which economic issues have become increasingly depoliticised. That said, some authors point out (for eg, Kriesi et al, 2006; Kholi, 2000) that it may be misleading to try to separate economic and cultural interests in this way. What, to us, is important here is the range of anti-modernisation and traditionalist themes which have been noted to help animate UKIP’s rhetoric and mobilise such voters. These include UKIP’s: strong cultural conservatism and backlash against issues such as gay marriage (Webb & Bale, 2014); it’s anti-establishment positioning (Abedi & Lundberg, 2009); support for civic nationalism and Euroscepticism (Tournier-Sol, 2015); rejection of multiculturalism, open borders and political correctness (Lynch & Whitaker, 2013); and, appeals for a return to national sovereignty (Crines & Heppell, 2015).

The Fluidity of Modernisation and Anti-modernising discourses

So far, we have argued that conflicts between modernising and anti-modernising forces are becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK, whilst showing that this development echoes wider trends across Europe. In this section, we attempt to build some theoretical flesh on the dynamics that help to constitute these conflicts; and in doing so, we venture to disrupt certain aspects of the dominant narrative. Specifically, our aim here is to emphasise the contingent and fluid character of these conflicts by reminding ourselves that modernisation is not a ‘real’ thing per se, but

rather a set of discourses which have become inscribed into a series of empirical observations which may not be largely precise or indeed linked to each other. To recognise the contingent character of modernisation is to acknowledge that modernisation 'does not simply progressively develop according to any logic internal either to it or to a wider historical process' (Finlayson, 2003: 73). Rather, the word modernisation has come to represent a wide, and often contradictory, variety of 'different needs, desires, strategies and demands'. Likewise, the proliferation of modernisation discourse has, in turn, helped to shape its own (seeming) antithesis in the form of anti-modernising and traditionalist discourses which rely on narratives of the past which likewise may not be accurate (Wodak & KhosraviNik, 2013; Pelinka, 2013) and which have also come to represent a diverse and often contradictory range of grievances, interests and political conflicts.

Whilst there is much to commend existing studies of the tension between modernising and anti-modernising forces, there remains a problematic tendency to see both positions as largely static and fixed ideological alignments. Thus voters, parties or factions are often portrayed as belonging firmly to one or either camp. This leads to two further problems. Firstly, there is a tendency to narrowly equate modernisation with the Left and anti-modernisation with the Right. Yet, if we compare, for eg, Jeremy Corbyn's version of 'old' Labour politics with that of Nigel Farage's UKIP, we can begin to detect some elements of commonality in their respective rejections of the modern and their defensive stance in favour of past traditions and established values. In this respect, both Corbyn and Farage, to varying degrees and from different starting points, share an undoubtedly anti-modernising ground. This could help to explain the strong appeal which UKIP has on former 'old' Labour voters. Moreover, it could also be used to hypothesise that Corbyn's own brand of retro style Labour politics may hold the potential to attract back some of those same voters. Secondly, there is a correlative tendency to view such voters, who are likely to be attracted to either camp, as having their own sets of interests and identities 'fixed' by their relationship to social changes such as the impact of globalisation. These voters' interests are often seen as pre-constituted, placing them in either the 'winners' or 'losers' camp. In fact, the lines between modernisation and anti-modernisation are often much more blurred, and it is reasonably common for political actors and voters to be able, at certain times, to move between each.

The fluidity of these alignments is evidenced in the intra party politics of the two main UK parties. In the Conservative party for eg, it is interesting to note that over the past three decades the 'modernisers' and 'traditionalists' have largely swapped roles. Whereas formerly the Thatcherites were viewed as the modernising, forward-looking force, these are now firmly rooted in the traditionalist camp, whilst it is the formerly more traditionalist 'one nation' Tories who have been able to take up the modernising mantle. Likewise, the contingent character of these alignments can also be seen in the ways that both modernisers and traditionalists have positioned themselves on specific policy issues. For eg, throughout the Coalition government, as Cameron sought to reduce the salience of Europe as part of his own modernisation strategy, it was the more traditionalist right of the party which was able to position themselves as progressive

modernisers keen to embrace ideas of popular democracy and globalisation to push for a reformed relationship with the EU (Lynch, 2015). Likewise, in debates over equal marriage, Tory modernisers fought hard to construct their modernising reform as an attempt to preserve and maintain more traditional Conservative ideas around the sanctity of marriage (Hayton & McEnhill, 2015). In Labour, even the Blairite modernisers inscribed their modernising agenda with a strong notion of tradition, as Blair sought to reconstruct the British political tradition as inherently bound to ideas of reform and change (Finlayson, 2003). Thus Blair's modernisation presented itself as an attempt to restore Britain's true heritage. Likewise, although much of Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric is aimed at restoring more traditional 'old' Labour values, it also promises to deliver a 'new', more progressive and modern type of politics.

As a result, it is fruitful to view the lines between modernisation and anti-modernisation as ones which are very often transgressed and made blurry by elite actors hoping to utilise such discourses in order to gain competitive advantage or dismiss their opponents. Thus, rather than view both positions as fixed alignments, it is more advantageous to acknowledge that the meanings and the specific constitution of political forces around each are a constantly contested and contingent field. In light of this, in our final section, we argue that modernisation and traditionalism are best viewed as performing the role in discourse of Ernesto Laclau's 'empty signifiers'. As empty signifiers, modernisation and traditionalist discourses, whilst preserving a relative autonomy from any specific and fixed sets of meaning, have come to serve three key political functions: 1) they are being increasingly used to mobilise voters; 2) they work to construct the identity and demands of such voters; 3) they help to create a social antagonism which attempts to depoliticise or naturalise particular policy agendas.

Modernisation and Traditionalism as Empty Signifiers

To assert the contingent character of modernisation and anti-modernisation is to move beyond some of the claims within the current literature. As we noted, a common claim is that the rejection of cultural and economic modernisation provides anti-establishment parties with an inherent appeal to groups of left behind voters. A strong implication here is that the relationship between these voters and their parties is 'bottom-up'; ie, the demands of the voters are pre-constituted by social changes and this then sets the conditions for anti-establishment parties to tap into this groundswell of already existing demand for a traditionalist agenda. From a Laclauian perspective, the problem with such a narrative is that it ignores the central role which political projects play, not only in mobilising such voters, but in helping to constitute the very interests, identities and demands of these voters. In some parts of the current literature, this point is partially acknowledged. For eg, Kriesi *et al* (2006: 923) observe that: 'on the one hand, parties position themselves strategically with respect to new political potentials, which are created by the new structural conflicts, on the other hand, *it is the very articulation of the new conflicts by political parties that structures the political space*'. This points to a mutually constitutive relationship between social change and political mobilisation; whereas globalisation opens up

political opportunities, it is for elite actors to decide how to construct and exploit these. What a Laclauian perspective brings is a recognition that the mobilisation of voters, either towards or against these social changes, involves the discursive constitution of group identities, such as that of the 'left behind'. As such, political mobilisation does not simply act upon pre-existing groups of voters; rather, the process of mobilisation itself plays a key role in the construction of these groups. Thus for Laclau, one must first constitute 'the people' who are to be mobilised and, it is here particularly, that empty signifiers come to play a central role (Laclau, 2005).

To Laclau, empty signifiers act as the focal points for hegemonic contestation between rival political projects. These components of discourse, which can come in the form of aims, figures, symbols or slogans, 'stand-in' as over-arching, but largely empty, representations of disparate, and often irreconcilable sets of demands. Their key function is to bring a symbolic coherence, meaning and unity - in Laclau's terms, an equivalential bond - to the otherwise distinct and unconnected social grievances they purport to represent. In doing so, they become the 'rallying point of passionate attachments', as those who are aggrieved within this equivalential chain - become constituted as 'the people' - and bring what Laclau terms a 'radical investment', or emotional attachment, to this symbolic representation of their cause. As such, empty signifiers, such as modernisation, become elevated to the status of 'the Thing' which 'the people' are seemingly demanding to see fulfilled; yet given their meaningless character, their achievement is ultimately unfulfillable.

In UK politics, modernisation has arguably performed such a role over the past few decades (Byrne et al, 2011). Whilst the word incorporates a variety of elements including globalisation, cultural pluralism, social liberalism, social justice and marketisation, its meaning remains sufficiently amorphous to allow it to mobilise heterogeneous groups of actors. Moreover, whilst modernisation works to make sense of a diverse array of social changes, so too does it function to produce ideas about which groups emerge as its 'winners' and 'losers'. Thus, it constructs lines of political conflict and identity - in this case between modernisers and traditionalists - whilst at the same time articulating a unity amongst the disparate parties, voters and demands it recruits to its cause. From a Laclauian perspective, what's at stake in these conflicts is a struggle to construct and mobilise the 'true people'; whether that be, for Corbynites, the true voice of Labour or for Farage, the authentic voice of the 'man in the pub'. Thus, Blair's modernising rhetoric promised to restore Britain's true heritage: 'his rhetoric seeks to arrange itself on the side of 'the people', and hence (by implication) opposed to the anti-popular interests of the anti-modernisers'. Importantly, in constituting this 'people', who stand on the side of modernisation, modernising discourses likewise work to constitute an antagonism with those outside the equivalential chain - the anti-modernisers - or in the case of New Labour, the 'forces of conservatism' (Finlayson, 2003). Thus, the former modernisation 'zeitgeist' can be said to have created its own conditions for a rival, anti-modernising backlash based around a reassertion of traditionalist values and practices. And, as with the modernisers, the anti-modernisers similarly seek to utilise traditionalist discourses to construct the same populist mandate, characterising the

modernisers as ‘out of touch’ with the more traditional values and aspirations of the British public.

This latter point allows us to identify another key function of modernising and anti-modernising discourses. Whilst they primarily work to mobilise and constitute voters, they also create a depoliticising / politicising dynamic which works towards delegitimising opposing agendas. Thus, modernisation discourses assert that one must ‘get real’, wake up and smell the coffee. They ridicule ‘out-of-touch’ backward-looking traditionalists and assert a ‘no alternative’ ethos (Hay, 1999). The de-politicising mechanism here is the assertion that the modernisers are expertly schooled in the ‘realities’ of the modern context and therefore the only actors knowledgeable enough to recognise the limited set of responses appropriate to that context. Thus, in discussing French and Dutch resistance to the EU project, Zizek (2005: 16) noted that the respective ‘No’ campaigns were infantilised, dismissed as immature and irrational forms of populism: ‘in their reaction to the *no* they treated the people like slow pupils who did not get the lesson of the experts; their self-criticism was the one of the teacher who admits that he failed to educate his pupils’. Likewise, similar types of rhetoric have been directed towards Jeremy Corbyn from all parts of the political spectrum. Such critics regularly deploy modernising discourses to dismiss Corbyn as a backward looking, intellectually deficient politician painfully out of touch with modern realities. For eg, Suzanne Moore wrote in the Guardian:

For Corbyn, the unspun unmoderniser, to lead an extra-parliamentary movement inside parliament, he needs to be intellectually deft. Leaders have to embody modernity, to represent who we think we are. Politics is about pragmatism, but it is also about ideas; there has to be an intellectual underpinning. Retro paternalism, whether from him or Farage, cannot be the future. Even getting into the present would be good.

Thus, although modernisation is ideological, in that it splits the political field into two camps (Finlayson, 2003) - one which is structured and rational in its approach and another which is nonsense or out-dated - it has the advantage of presenting itself as non-ideological and therefore a practical, common sense approach to contemporary realities. Likewise, just as modernisers work towards naturalising their agendas, so too are similar ‘get real’ discourses also employed by the anti-modernisers. Whilst the right attempt to portray the liberal elite as fantasists deluded by modern myths of egalitarianism, multi-culturalism and political correctness, the left portray the neo-liberal faith in progress as delusional, whilst emphasising the hard realities of poverty, conflict, exploitation and inequality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our argument is that in recent years, anti-modernising discourses, based around a reassertion of past practices and traditions, have taken an increasingly prominent position alongside modernisation discourses as rallying points for the mobilisation of voters in the UK.

The antagonism between modernisers and anti-modernisers has been deepening since the onset of the financial crisis and is working to create a field of political conflict which is increasingly helping to structure both intra and inter party competition across the political spectrum. Yet, rather than view these as static alignments, we have argued that both positions are better characterised as relational and fluid discursive fields which are often transgressed by protagonists from both camps. As such, the meanings, and thereby the specific constitution of political forces around each, are a constantly contestable and contingent field, open to various language games. Thus, the recourse to either a modernising or anti-modernising discourse can be used by elite actors as a relational strategic positioning in a context in which one, or other discourse has become dominant. As we have attempted to show here, this emerging conflict, which has long divided the Conservative party, and which is evident throughout much of Western Europe, has extended itself in recent years towards fuelling both the recent rise in electoral support for UKIP, and the emergence of strong, grassroots support within Labour for Jeremy Corbyn.

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