Title
New Labour in Time

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bc2639p

Journal
Parliamentary Affairs, 60

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Publication Date
2007

Peer reviewed
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Published in: Parliamentary Affairs 60 (2007), 332-340

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II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His publications include New Labour: A Critique (Routledge, 2005); The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge University Press, 1999); and, with R.A.W. Rhodes, both Governance Stories (Routledge, 2006), and Interpreting British Governance (Routledge, 2003).
Tony Blair looks tired. He no longer has the young optimistic appearance he did as the incoming Prime Minister in 1997. We all age, of course. But Blair seems scarred by the cares of office. He often has a thin, pinched look, as if it has all been too much, especially when he is troubled or attacked. He has an aura of disappointment. Several observers talk of unfulfilled promise. I do not say all this in criticism: although I disagree with many of Blair’s policies, I retain considerable admiration for the man and for his achievements. I say it, rather, because in these respects, as in so many others, Blair is emblematic of New Labour. Over time New Labour too has come to seem tired, disappointed, and unfulfilled.

I am grateful to Stuart McAnulla for providing me with an opportunity to discuss the changing nature of New Labour, and to do so in relation to abstract questions about institutions, history, and social analysis.

On New Labour – once more

Let us begin by putting abstract theories to one side so as to consider changes in New Labour. There are few attempts to distinguish stages in the history of New Labour. As a first attempt, we might distinguish three stages. In the “formative stage” prior to the 1997 election, New Labour was about reforming the Party to achieve electoral victory. The main features of this stage were organizational changes within the Party, a review of policy commitments, and the promotion of a rather vacuous image of “New” Labour to signal a break with the past. In the “delivery stage”, from 1997 until about 2003, New
Labour was in government and implementing reforms across the public sector, the welfare state, the economy, and the constitution. If we subdivided the delivery stage, we might say that: it began with a time of caution in which the government felt constrained by a fiscal and financial legacy; it passed through a time of modernization in which many of the reforms were supposed to make Britain more innovative, dynamic, and competitive; and it ended with a time of redistribution in which the emphasis fell as much on using limited budgetary resources to tackle the poverty – especially the social exclusion – of targeted groups. Finally, in the “tired stage”, from 2003 onwards, New Labour has faced mounting criticism, spent more and more time dealing with events and disasters, and perhaps lost some of its faith in its own agenda. Arguably the divisions within New Labour have become so acute that we should talk instead of “Blairism” – a combination of the policies that characterized the delivery stage with a highly contentious foreign policy characterized by muscular interventionism.

In *New Labour: A Critique*, I offered an account of the ideas and policies that dominated the formative and delivery stages. New Labour drew on institutionalism and communitarianism to respond to dilemmas that had been highlighted by the New Right. Institutionalism and communitarianism entered New Labour by way of scholars, policy-advisers, and think-tanks. The relevant buzzwords included networks, partnerships, civic engagement, trust, social capital, and responsibility. The relevant ideas inspired much of the government’s public sector reform, welfare reform, and economic policy.

As McAnulla points out, however, governments are not necessarily consistent in time, let alone over time. How adequate is my account of New Labour for its tired stage? Generally time has been kind to my account of New Labour. The same buzzwords still
resonate, and the same programmatic ideas still inspire much public policy. What, then, has changed? One change is perhaps that the government has less scope for policies based on programmatic ideas. Policy disasters have been distractions that sometimes discredited the government: examples range from the millennium dome to the Hutton Inquiry. Events have sapped the government’s energy: examples range from Joe Moore’s claim that 9/11 was a good day to bury bad news to the much more serious appearance of new terrorist threats. Foreign policy, from Kosovo to Iraq, has been time-consuming, and it has used-up good will among the press, the Party, and the electorate. Another change is that the government has lost some of its faith in its own agenda. On the one hand, institutionalism and communitarianism continue to inspire government policies, as evidenced by foundation hospitals and the leading-edge partnership programme for schools. But, on the other hand, there is a growing sense that some policies have not lived up to expectations – they have not created the dynamic, innovative, and responsible citizens, organizations, and society promised by institutionalism and communitarianism.

New Labour’s declining scope and faith in its agenda has had spin-off effects elsewhere. Consider, for example, the relationship of No. 10 to the rest of Whitehall. After 1997 New Labour introduced various centralizing measures to increase the role of the Cabinet Office and the strategic capability of the centre. Yet, since about 2003, there has been a shift from regular and routine interactions in the context of these centralizing measures, to what we might call No.10 as “searchlight”. Government Departments are largely left alone by No. 10 save that they are suddenly and intermittently subject to intense scrutiny and a flurry of activity. The altered relationship between No. 10 and the rest of Whitehall reflects the declining scope for programmatic policy-making: the
searchlight typically focuses on Departments when they are involved in a policy disaster or newsworthy event. The altered relationship also reflects New Labour’s declining faith in its programmatic agenda: Departments are generally left to go their own way in part because No. 10 is less sure about where it thinks they should be going.

On Evidence (and Positivism)

It is possible that New Labour’s declining faith in its agenda helps to explain its growing enthusiasm for evidence-based policy-making. At first New Labour had full confidence in the policies it adopted in accord with its institutionalist and communitarian agenda. Hence reforms were often rolled out without waiting for detailed studies of pilot projects. Examples include Best Value in local government, joined-up government, the New Deals for the unemployed, and arguably even private finance initiatives. Today, in its tired stage, New Labour seems less certain that its programmatic policies will have the results it desires. Hence the government appears to have become more committed to the development of principles of best practice and to evidence-based policy-making.

Although I think that there has been a growing emphasis on evidence in policy-making, I would want to distinguish evidence from the indicators and targets mentioned by McAnulla. On the one hand, New Labour has always relied on indicators and targets to monitor and to influence policy actors; it adopted them partly in an attempt to address the dilemmas of fragmentation and control associated with the new public management and later public sector reforms. On the other hand, New Labour has come, in its tired stage, to rely on the evidence and experience provided by test cases to formulate policies or to extend policies to other areas. I would also want to be careful about equating either
of these aspects of New Labour’s policy-making with positivism. British governments relied on an empiricist, and arguably positivist, approach to policy making for much of the twentieth century. Many of them also hoped that an empiricist, and at times positivist, social science could provide policy solutions. New Labour is no more entangled with positivist social science and the expertise it appears to offer than were earlier governments.

An adequate account of New Labour needs to pin down the particular strands of social science – institutionalism and communitarianism – upon which it relies. Indeed, I would argue that these strands of social science have inspired New Labour to adopt the types of policies that McAnulla mentions as departures from a top-down positivism. Institutionalism inspires the concern with involving diverse actors in policy networks. Communitarianism inspires both the concern with a culture of personal responsibility, and the concern to build social capital and political legitimacy. One of my main aims in New Labour was thus to suggest that while New Labour appears to concern itself with participation and dialogue, it does so as part of a top-down strategy. It does so because institutionalists have suggested that networks and partnerships are uniquely efficient, creative, dynamic, and effective. It does so because communitarians have suggested that social capital and political involvement will improve social order and political legitimacy. The ideals of participation and dialogue are tamed by the claim that they will lead to an efficient, well-ordered, prosperous, and harmonious society.

Just as I would place less emphasis than McAnulla on New Labour’s use of observation and measurement, so I am less troubled by it. My critique of New Labour is, first, that it does not recognize the contingent roots of its ideas within institutionalism and
communitarianism, and, second, that it thus tames participation and dialogue by its miss-
placed faith in the expertise offered by institutionalism and communitarianism. Of

course my views overlap with McAnulla’s in that my complaint about these forms of

social science is that they remain at least tacitly indebted to modernist empiricism or even

positivism. Yet, as McAnulla recognizes, what worries me about positivism is its

(philosophical) neglect of meanings and contingency, not its (methodological) concern

with evidence, observation, and measurement. Indeed, I think that social scientists and
governments should concern themselves with observable evidence, and I am quite happy
for them to gather quantitative and qualitative data using methods as different as textual
analysis, participant observation, formal modeling, and statistical analysis. I just do not
want the relevant evidence or data to be treated in a way that objectifies human agents or
reifies the products of their action.

On Structures (and Institutions)

One of McAnulla’s complaints about positivism is philosophical. He complains that positivists reject appeals to structures and other entities that cannot be observed or measured. Although it seems unlikely that positivists really reject all appeals to anything we cannot observe, I do not want to debate just how we should characterize a philosophy that I too oppose. What concerns me is, rather, McAnulla’s suggestion that I would reject any appeal to an entity that cannot be observed. He is mistaken, or at least vague about what it is he opposes. My work is replete with appeals to objects that cannot be observed or measured. For example, I propose that we explain actions (eg. New Labour’s policies) by reference to beliefs (eg. an institutionalist faith in networks and a communitarian
concern with personal responsibility), and these beliefs are not observable but rather objects that we postulate through inference to the best explanation.

Although McAnulla complains that I do not allow for the unobservable, his main concern is with the specific case of social structures, as opposed to other unobservable objects and mechanisms such as gravity and beliefs. Before I consider social structures, I want to clarify another feature of my work. McAnulla suggests that I do not believe in “objective reality”: he insists, supposedly against me, that there is a reality independent of our knowledge of it, and that we are situated within objective social circumstances. Again, he is mistaken, or at least vague about what it is he opposes. My work clearly suggests that, say, Blair exists, and he does so in a social world composed of people and actions that exist independent of him and on which he can have little, if any, impact.

So, when we now turn to the specific case of social structures, we can see that the issue cannot be whether or not there is an objective reality. To the contrary, the issues are: what kinds of objects do we think exist, and what relationship do we think these objects have to human actions. McAnulla’s complaint seems to be that I do not allow for the existence of social structures, or that I do not allow sufficiently for their impact on action. Unfortunately I find it difficult to reply to this complaint because I am not sure what he means by “social structure” and “institution” – he leaves these terms unhelpfully vague with respect to their philosophical commitments.

One way to proceed is briefly to mention four types of objects that I think exist and that resemble structures and institutions. I use the term “tradition” to capture the idea that a social inheritance influences the beliefs that people adopt and so the actions they attempt to perform. I use the term “practice” to suggest that people act within a social
context: when people attempt to perform an action, their ability actually to do so typically depends on how others act. I use the term “dilemma” to capture the idea that people’s experiences of the world can conflict with their beliefs thereby forcing a change in their beliefs and actions. Finally, I accept that actions can have “unintended consequences”, although I would add that such consequences are often the product of the actions (and so intentionality) of others.

Another way to proceed is briefly to mention some philosophical commitments from which I recoil. The term “tradition” recoils from determinism so as to allow for agency and contingency. Social inheritances never fix (nor strictly limit) the beliefs people might adopt and so the actions they might try to perform (as opposed to those they actually can perform). A norm or rule does not fix how people understand it, let alone how people respond to it. The term “practice” recoils from reification so as to allow for subjectivity and intentionality. Practices are clusters of actions, where actors’ beliefs are constitutive of their actions. Institutions or structures do not have a content or path of development that is fixed, independent of the contingent agency of the relevant people. The term “dilemma” recoils from epistemological foundationalism so as to allow for the interpreted nature of all experience. Dilemmas are always subjective or intersubjective understandings of social reality. We cannot assume that people experience the world as we take it to be.

Yet another way to proceed is to attack head-on the ways in which people often use terms like “social structure” or “institution”. These terms are often used vaguely in ways that tempt people, willingly or not, to slide from traditions, practices, dilemmas, and the like to covert forms of determinism, reification, and foundationalism. Consider the
widespread claim, echoed by McAnulla, that institutions possess an inertial tendency or a stickiness. This claim gets perilously close to determinism. It implies that there is a kind of causal mechanism that fixes the content or development of an institution albeit by way of fixing the agency of the relevant people: if agency was not fixed in this way, then the stickiness would appear only when the relevant people happened to act in a certain way, so stickiness would be merely a descriptive term to be applied to such cases, not a term capable of doing explanatory work. What is more, when institutionalists try to make sense of their claim about institutional stickiness, they get perilously close to reification or epistemological foundationalism. They appear to commit to reification when they imply that the mechanism or feedback process operates independent of intentionality. But when they conceive of the mechanism as a feedback process that operates through intentionality, they typically imply that the relevant people hold correct or rational beliefs about the nature of the institution or about the costs of change in a way that appears to commit them to epistemological foundationalism.

If we are to avoid determinism, reification, and foundationalism, we need to allow that institutions are the products of contingent actions inspired by theory-laden beliefs. Hence whether an institution or policy proves sticky depends on the beliefs the relevant people hold about its nature and about the desirability and costs of change. We cannot explain New Labour’s acceptance of the privatisation of the railways, for example, by reference to either a reified concept of inertia or the objective costs of altering the policy; we have to refer to the beliefs of the relevant policy-makers about the costs and benefits of accepting or rejecting the policy. No doubt appeals to institutions or structures can be shorthand for appeals to clusters of contingent actions and beliefs. But the worry remains
that institutionalists are bewitched by their shorthand. They forget to treat their shorthand as something that needs unpacking in terms of contingent actions and beliefs.

**On History (and Humanism)**

The concept of social structure is often unhelpfully vague. The reason for its vagueness lies in its history, especially in the context of socialist theory. Structures (and the related debate about structure and agency) made almost no appearance in socialist thought until the work of Louis Althusser in the 1960s. Althusser deployed structuralism to claim that Marxism was a science and so to oppose humanist readings of Marx with their emphasis on concepts such as species-being, alienation, and emancipation. Indeed, his structuralism explicitly excluded reference to agency, conceiving individual subjects as the passive supports of social structures. Althusser’s concept of structure lurks behind much of its current use: if some critical realists attempted to ground Marxism on realist philosophies of science – contrast Roy Bhaskar’s tendency to judge the scientific nature of a practice in comparison to the natural sciences with Althusser’s apparent view that there are only various scientific practices not an ideal of science as such – others have been inspired by regulation theory and other forms of Marxism on which Althusser had a clear influence. Nonetheless, although the concept “structure” was introduced precisely in order to craft a social science that did not appeal to agency, it is now generally used in conjunction with a commitment to agency. Problems arise from the awkward persistence of the term “structure” long after the demise of structuralism. One problem is vagueness over the philosophical analysis of structure, its relationship to agency, and its explanatory
power – a vagueness that gives rise to an on-off affair with determinism, reification, and foundationalism.

A similar vagueness – and on-off affair with determinism, reification, and foundationalism – appears in structuralist and institutionalist discussions of the role of history in social science. (It is worth pausing here to note that Althusser’s concept of structure also lurks behind some concepts of “institution”, especially those associated with historical institutionalism and the study of the state, because several institutionalists initially defined their research agenda as “bringing the state back in” and their concept of the state added to modernist empiricism the state theory of Althusser’s student, Nicos Poulantzas.\(^1\)) So, although the new institutionalism has brought forth a chorus of “history matters”, the members of the choir rarely pause to explain why or how history is important. Sometimes their silence occurs alongside an implicit treatment of history as a mere source of illustrative cases. The more historically minded of them appeal to history, in contrast, on the grounds that an adequate account of some social phenomena has to refer to temporal mechanisms or processes. Historical institutionalists, for example, regularly use metaphors that evoke a sense of time – path dependency, critical juncture, event, and sequencing.

Alas, however, when institutionalists deploy these metaphors, they get entangled with determinism, reification, and foundationalism. Their temporal mechanisms and processes come across as generalizations that operate either irrespective of agency or, more usually, through an agency that is fixed by norms or a universal rationality.\(^2\) The mechanisms and processes are treated as reifications that operate irrespective of the contingency of human agency. They are mistakenly given an objective content divorced
from the specific influences of time and place. Hence when historical institutionalists reify processes and mechanisms, then, far from treating history as a mode of explanation, they provide us with explanations that rely on the abstract logic of the mechanism or process. The mechanisms and processes are temporal – they take time to unfold – but not historical – their operation is reduced to an abstract logic instead of being shown to be contingent upon the particular beliefs and actions of people at a particular time.

If we are to avoid reifications and allow properly for agency, we need to treat history as a mode of explanation. Historical narratives explain social phenomena not by reference to reified process, mechanism, or norm, but, rather, by describing contingent patterns of action in their specific contexts. Such narratives are not only temporal in that they move through time; they are also historical in that locate the phenomena at a specific moment in time.

Institutionalists are, of course, often explicitly wary of historical (as opposed to temporal) explanations. They allow that historical narratives can illuminate particular cases, but they complain that narratives cannot inspire research programmes or provide the kind of expertise that we need to formulate policy. It seems to me that just such a complaint inspires McAnulla’s suggestion that my views entail a far-reaching shift in socialist theory: he worries that an emphasis on contingency and so particularity will deprive socialists of the kind of expertise they need to develop policies that reform or transform the ills of capitalism.

Socialists have long sought to combine or find a balance between, on the one hand, humanist ideals of self-rule, freedom, and emancipation, and, on the other hand, a commitment to the provision of social goods such as redistributive justice. Although I
believe in just such a balance, I am also struck by the potential conflict between self-rule and the knowledge that socialists claim to possess about social goods and the means of realising them. When socialists appeal to structures or institutions, they, like other social scientists, appear, as we have seen, to be claiming to have knowledge of determinant and reified social processes, and this claim threatens self-rule; this claim sustains an approach to policy-making in which participation and dialogue are made subservient to an alleged expertise. Now, McAnulla is correct to suggest that many socialists consider expert knowledge to be a pre-requisite of collective action to promote social goods, and that my views would entail a far-reaching shift away from this faith in expertise. Nonetheless, there are alternative strands of socialism (humanist, non-governmental, libertarian, and pluralist) that have asserted the claims of self-rule even against socialist expertise, and my views do not entail anything like so far-reaching a shift for these latter socialists.

Conclusion

New Labour: A Critique draws on humanist and pluralist strands of socialism. It insists on the concepts of agency and self-rule in contrast to a fixation on social science and expertise. It challenges structural, institutional, and economistic accounts of New Labour. It provides a historical narrative of New Labour in time. And it reframes questions about the future of the left in terms of promoting democratic self-rule as much as reforming capitalism.

The main analyses of path dependency of which I am aware rely on assumptions about rational action. These assumptions sustain a model of the way in which an initial choice $C$ can create extra costs for later attempts to depart from $C$ such that rational individuals stick with $C$ even though, in the absence of these extra costs, $C$ would no longer be the optimal outcome for them.