



CHICAGO JOURNALS

NACBS
North American
Conference on
British Studies

Mark Bevir. New Labour: A Critique

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Source: *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 238-240

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [The North American Conference on British Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/500915>

Accessed: 11/05/2011 09:49

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Such criticisms highlight a key weakness of single issue campaigns—the failure to make linkages between inequalities and injustices that can only be effectively challenged by broader political movements. Fieldhouse provides a balanced analysis but, at times, needed to transcend the narrow perspective of the AAM. Additionally, the AAM needed to be contextualized within a longer history of British middle-class pressure group activity in defense of exploited colonial subjects beginning with the Anti-Slavery Movement. Such groups shared similarities in tactics, membership, and problematic relationships with more radical organizations. All employed middle-class networking, organizing, publicity skills, and influence in governmental circles to promote their cause of “conscience.” Specifically, the Friends of Africa and South African Joint Councils, formed in opposition to racial segregation in South Africa, were important pre-Second World War precedents to the AAM, with which they shared many similarities in terms of complex relations with the Left and the Africans whom they sought to help (Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945* [London, Routledge, 1999]). A strong interconnection was liberal antipathy for communism. The AAM had “an almost pathological fear of the militancy and direct action advocated by the ‘far left’” and distanced itself from the British and South African Communist Parties in order not to deter its middle-class supporters (226). Ironically, the right of the British labor movement believed that the AAM was controlled by South African communist exiles, whereas the organization was wary of communist influence in the ANC, and the relationship between the ANC and AAM was threatened by the turn to armed liberation struggle. Connections between the Irish Republican Army and the ANC were viewed as particularly problematic.

Apartheid ended as a result of a combination of powerful forces, internal and external: the 1986 U.S. Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act that reduced imports from South Africa by 50 percent (70), the increasing economic weakness of the South African economy resulting from the costs of war with Angola and disinvestment, mounting international opinion against Apartheid, and the internal resistance of the Mass Democratic Movement and the township uprisings. As Apartheid began to fragment in the 1980s, the boycotts pioneered by the AAM began to break down. After 1990 and the release of Mandela, membership rapidly dropped off, and the AAM found itself increasingly without a role, although it was transformed into Action for South Africa (ACTSA) in 1994. The contribution of the AAM to ending Apartheid must be assessed in relation to these wider forces and the parallel activities of Anti-Apartheid movements in Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Holland, France, and Ireland. Yet, the ANC acknowledged the contribution of the AAM, and, given the historic links between Britain and South Africa, the history of the organization is worthy of record. *Anti-Apartheid* is thus a useful addition to an emergent literature on the international dimension to the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa.

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MARK BEVIR. *New Labour: A Critique*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. 192. \$34.95.

The “critique” in the title of Mark Bevir’s analysis of New Labour refers not to criticism, but to an examination of the ideological commitments behind this apparently pragmatic political program. Bevir argues that New Labour is a response from within the tradition of social democracy to the policies and program of the New Right. That response, however, relies upon forms of social science that conceive of facts as existing independently of interpretation, thereby sustaining claims to expert knowledge and management. Bevir, by contrast, advocates an interpretive political science, one that historicizes intellectual and political

developments so as to reveal their origins, content, and—crucially—contingency. Despite its rhetoric about the necessity of a “Third Way” response to globalization, then, in Bevir’s analysis New Labour appears as just one possible response to the New Right from within the rich tradition of social democracy.

The book consists of three parts. Chapters 2 and 3 explore two forms of social science central to New Labour: institutionalism and communitarianism. The new institutionalism offers an alternative to the New Right’s attempts to replace inept bureaucracies with efficient markets, emphasizing instead the value of networks and partnerships in providing services. Communitarianism laments a breakdown in shared values over the second half of the twentieth century, emphasizing individual responsibility within the contexts of family and work. Chapters 4 and 5 follow the translation of these ideas and values into specific policy domains. For instance, instead of exclusive reliance upon either the state (old Labour) or markets (New Right), New Labour’s reforms to the welfare state emphasize networks, partnerships, and individual responsibility; New Labour’s handling of the economy, meanwhile, amounts to what Bevir calls “supply side socialism.” Here, too, the state plays a central—but transformed—role, maintaining economic stability and providing personal training in a world being transformed by mobile capital and new technologies.

These two pairs of chapters are bookended by historical critiques of trends in political science (chap. 1) and social democracy (chap. 6). Chapter 1 traces the transition from narrative to scientism in social science in the first half of the twentieth century, a development that resulted in the triumph of “modernist empiricism.” Modernist empiricism conceives of facts about the social world as existing independently of interpretation. Bevir favors “interpretivism,” a theoretical stance recognizing that facts, beliefs, actions, and institutions must always be understood in relation to each another. Interpretivism thus bears some relation to poststructuralism, but Bevir is careful to distinguish his analysis from one that would implicitly reintroduce the assumptions of modernist empiricism by treating ideology, discourse, or language as objectified categories of their own; he also affirms his belief in the situated agency of individuals who confront specific problems in the context of particular traditions. The key point to emerge out of this chapter is that since both institutionalism and communitarianism rely upon forms of modernist empiricism, their promises to offer control in the present rely upon claims to expert knowledge that emerged in the recent past. If an interpretivist account can show that these claims emerged historically and stumble philosophically, Bevir suggests, space is then opened up for alternative forms of both political science and politics.

Chapter 6 outlines the possibilities for social democracy that follow from the foregoing critique. Bevir shows that New Labour stands in a political tradition that emphasizes representative democracy (instead of popular participation) and expert management (instead of decentralized pluralism). He believes that an interpretivist account, by contrast, points toward alternative forms of politics in at least two ways: by revealing the availability of other intellectual and political traditions, and by emphasizing the inclinations toward fellowship that follow the recognition of mutual interdependence. In other words—and despite New Labour’s insistence to the contrary—alternatives to both the New Right and the “Third Way” are indeed available, pointing the way away from representative management and toward pluralist democracy.

In the context of this challenge to the assumptions and ascendance of New Labour, Bevir’s final point is perhaps surprising: he urges social democrats who are critical of New Labour to continue to work within the party. “New Labour might not be what we want, but that is no reason to despair of the Party,” he concludes, “it is a reason, rather, to work through democratic processes to promote our alternative visions within the Party as well the wider society of which it is a part” (156). This affirmation of the Labour Party as a necessary and viable vehicle for the realization of social democratic ideals underscores an ironic effect of Bevir’s critique. Rather than figuring as an expedient abandonment of its historical principles,

Bevir shows that New Labour is best understood within the tradition of social democracy; and rather than constituting a tactical concession to the terms of governance established by Margaret Thatcher, Bevir shows that New Labour represents a formidable response to the program of the New Right. Bevir's critical analysis thus testifies to the moral sincerity and political substance of New Labour—attributes that commentators and historians alike (not to mention critics on both left and right) still remain reluctant to acknowledge. *New Labour: A Critique* is a provocative and compelling contribution to intellectual and political history, as well as to politics and government.

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ANDREW HINDMOOR. *New Labour at the Centre: Constructing Political Space*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 218. \$74.00 (cloth).

Andrew Hindmoor's *New Labour at the Centre: Constructing Political Space* is a work of political theory, and while Hindmoor says that he hopes the book will appeal to a general as well as a specialized audience, it is a book primarily for political scientists. For the central purpose of the book is to revise a classic of political theory—Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957)—and the so-called median voter theorem that is derived from it. In the process, Hindmoor is challenging the whole “rational choice” approach to voter analysis, which also is derived from Downs. In developing his argument, Hindmoor takes nearly all of his evidence from Tony Blair's leadership of the Labour Party, with occasional looks back to the era of Neil Kinnock. Thus, the interest of the book to the historian is as a reinterpretation of the tactics of New Labour, and while it is a major reinterpretation of one of the principal voter-behavior theories, from the historian's standpoint it is useful mostly for complicating our understanding of what it means to say that Blair (and Kinnock) pulled the party toward the center.

The median voter theorem is derived from utility analysis and general equilibrium theory in economics. (Downs was a student of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow.) It assumes that voters are rational decision makers. They have ordered preferences from left to right, shaped by what Downs calls their “fixed conceptions of the good society” (Hindmoor, 127), and they seek to maximize utility based on those preferences. It assumes that voters can make accurate calculations about both where their own preferences and where party policies fall on a left-to-right scale. They vote for the party that is closest to their preferences. Parties must move to the center (the median voter) in order to maximize their votes and so to win elections. The underlying assumptions are that voters behave rationally and that they (and the parties) have perfect information that enable them to make rational decisions—although Downs himself recognizes that there is no perfect information, which he believes is one reason parties may not actually move to the center.

Hindmoor denies that there is an objective center toward which parties can move. “Policies and parties are not inherently centrist. They are constructed as being such. A party that wants to present itself as being at the political centre will promote a definition of that term and a corresponding account of its policies that best supports [sic] such a description” (63). In arguing that the political center is constructed, Hindmoor clearly is borrowing from post-modernist theory; however, as he points out, unlike a postmodernist, he believes there is such a thing as the center, and like the rational choice theorists, he believes that parties aspire to claim the center in order to win elections. He is simply denying that political space is prearranged and fixed along a straight line, so that there is an objective center that can be rationally determined by measurement, and he is denying that policies are inherently left, right, or center. Rather, the center has to be constructed by the parties themselves. Indeed, the competition