

The Oxford Left Review

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THE OXFORD LEFT REVIEW

EDITORIAL

The contemporary Left lacks direction. For the last decade social liberalism has held sway. Inequality grew, but economic growth meant more people had more money so it didn't matter. A desire for steadily more of the 'stuff' that capitalism delivered has made socialist alternatives unfashionable. The question was how to pursue the aims of social justice in a free economy. The answer was to work within the capitalist structures, and to use the market as the means of government.

To treat people as individual, free-willed consumers became a matter of course - liberty came to mean non-interference. But in a world of social and material pressures such 'liberty' simply meant that the privileged could indulge freely, while others tried to keep up. Equality of opportunity came to be the bywords of a government offering choices then leaving people to pick. Yet the questions we ask must be: why did they pick the choice they did? Was it really free? And can we bring ourselves to accept that people can make the wrong choices? Redefining liberty in positive terms is the antidote to individualistic 'freedom', yet it requires far more commitment and resources.

Treading the Third Way may or may not have been necessary to keep Labour in power for over a decade. In any case, the recent British survey of social attitudes show that its effect on public opinion has weakened the cause of the left. The sobering, objective words of editor Professor John Curtice speak volumes:

"In repositioning itself ideologically, New Labour has helped ensure that British public opinion now has a more conservative character."

Perhaps the left has arrived at its ultimate aim of social capitalism, and its challenge is now to defend the doctrine in the face of opposition. Government is dominated by 'pragmatists' content to tweak the edges of the system to make some people better off some of the time. Perhaps aiming for maximising choices for all within a free market is the only viable end for the Left.

Lets hope not. Such politics lead to inequality. The research of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett analysed in *The Spirit Level* provides solid evidence that inequality causes shorter, unhappier and unhealthier lives, while Polly Toynbee and David Walker's *Unjust Rewards* bring home the realities of such an unequal world. Inequality has become the rallying point for the Left - the call to arms, and mental fight.

So much for Britain. The focus on inequality is more accessible than the events of the rest of the world, in which Britain is becoming merely a suburb in a global economy. The market reigns, and crises follow in its wake.

Editorial

The modern left does not have the direction and goals that it once had. Career politicians aside, young people have defected from traditional political activism, partly because procedure and have replaced intellectual engagement. Only now is the broad left beginning to express itself in more innovative ways, offering new interpretations of liberty and democracy, and adapting politically to environmental and global change.

A movement requires a destination, or at least a direction. At present, while we have ideals of equality and social justice, there is nowhere to go – we understand the problem, but now we need to find how to approach it. The political spectrum is less clear now than it has ever been, and various sources have a contribution to make to Left renewal.

This journal seeks to be the voice of the Left within Oxford, and to provide a forum for intellectual socialist, democratic and other Left wing thought. Groups outside the mainstream left are finding common ground - yellows and greens join with the traditional red to try to keep up with the world. But how many flashes of Leftist inspiration flare up in colleges or libraries, then burn out with nothing to fuel them further?

The journal's name reflects its aim. First, to review the Oxford Left – to find those vessels of Leftist thought floating, uncoordinated, through Oxford's intellectual sea, and to act as their many coloured flagship. As the journal of Compass Oxford whose young yet thriving branch of the Compass think-tank is a forum for debate and a coalition of those on the democratic Left, the OLR aims to contribute to finding direction for the movement.

Second, to review the national and global Left, and to bring the ideas of the modern left into Oxford and to the attention of this generation of students. The Review will benefit from the overlap between undergraduates, postgraduates and academics, and aims to bring in ideas from established commentators outside of Oxford. Today's students work and learn in an extremely depoliticized environment, with life increasingly electronic and market-based. It is even suggested that the subjects we study are – especially in the social sciences – shaped by the (neo-) liberal, Anglo-Saxon tradition. The OLR will be a concerted intellectual alternative.

Oxford was once at the vanguard of Left renewal. In the 1950s four Oxford graduates established the Universities and Left Review, for two years an influential voice of the New Left, and sought to provide a forum where the different traditions of leftist discussion were free to meet in open controversy. Half a century later, our aims are similar. In 1959, after two successful years, it merged with another periodical to become the New Left Review, which continues to be a serious intellectual forum, informing, provoking and reviewing leftist debate. The obvious tribute in style and name to the New Left Review will not have been lost on many readers. However, the OLR is not a Marxist journal; indeed, it is unaffiliated to any political party and offers no particular political doctrine of its own.

As we watch from afar the rise of great new industrial nations, and become ever-

smaller players in our suburb of the global economy, reviving the Left is for the short- and long-term. Wherever the world ends up, the Left must speak for collective justice; but it must speak with a voice and a language that is sustained and cultivated. The language of the intellectual Left is too often moderate, cautious and constrained. It speaks without conviction, trying to justify itself to a consumerist public.

Yet within the intellectual environment, it can learn to speak with a new voice, and, once the language is shared and learned, it can be developed with the collective creativity of a broad, progressive coalition. The Universities and Left Review described itself in its first edition as a calculated risk. I hope there is a voice to be found, and I hope that the OLR can help the Left to find its voice in Oxford, to communicate to the broader Left, and never to cease from the mental fight for justice, equality and democracy and sustainability. Amid growing national and global inequality, and short- and long-term crises, there's everything Left to do.

The Oxford Left Review is published termly. The journal will be most valuable if discussion develops around the issues and themes of each edition. Responses to any articles are welcome.

Contributions to future editions are also welcome.

Any contributions, responses or queries should be sent to the editor at cailean.gallagher@balliol.ox.ac.uk.

Editor-in-Chief: Cailean Gallagher (Balliol College)
Associate Editors: Matthew Kennedy (St. Hugh's College)
Jeremy Cliffe (Worcester College)

Oxford Left Review online: <http://compassoxford.wordpress.com/olr>

LIBERTY, EQUALITY AND THE REPUBLICAN IDEAL

SAMUEL BURT

Isaiah Berlin famously claimed there were two concepts of liberty, and convincingly argued that the 'positive' version had been abused by the defenders of paternalism, totalitarianism and liberty's opposite throughout history. But his schema was flawed, and Quentin Skinner is right: there are three concepts. The idea of liberty that I advocate and associate with the politics of the left is one of freedom to do something or be someone, though not any one particular thing or person, and it is an idea of liberty that can be traced back to debates over slavery and citizenship in ancient Greece and Rome.

In the polarized context of the Cold War at its height, Berlin argued that all competing concepts of liberty could ultimately be classified as ideas of positive and negative liberty. Theorists of negative liberty assert that a person who is free possesses a sphere of non-interference; a set of resources, interests and rights that are that individual's private domain, within which their desires are free from obstruction by external agents. On the other hand, theorists of positive liberty argue that a free person is not only to be free from external pressures, but also from internal impediments to their will; to be a rational, self-directing and autonomous agent who is thereby capable of leading a life of meaning and purpose they have chosen for themselves. It is an ideal of rational self-government and self-actualization.

The essence of the negative-positive distinction is that for believers in negative liberty, individual freedom is always freedom from outside interference that obstructs the individual will, whilst positive freedom is always freedom to do something or be someone. By ascribing a particular positive content to this 'someone', the many theories of positive liberty focus on how the individual may be internally prevented from discovering their true, rational will and thus achieving their highest potentialities as human beings. Thus, for believers in positive liberty interference that coerces individuals does not necessarily reduce their freedom; if it allows the individual to discover her true interests then it increases her freedom by liberating her from old prejudices, dogmas or blind emotions. By contrast, such interference always entails a loss of freedom on the negative account; even if the end result leads to greater freedom, the fact of a net gain does not change the fact of an intrinsic gross depletion of the individual's liberty.

However, Quentin Skinner has since proposed that there are in fact three concepts of liberty, and that Berlin's schema overlooks a distinction within the category of negative liberty between two schools of thought: the classical liberal and the civic republican traditions. It is the ideas on liberty associated with the latter tradition, traced by Skinner from the Roman legal code on slavery, that I believe should form the bedrock of beliefs about liberty on the modern left. To show why this is so, I will first illuminate the distinction, internal to negative liberty, between coercion understood as non-interference and as non-domination.

As I have said, Berlin believed that all negative theories of liberty are focussed on external impediments to individual freedom, so that statements about individuals being free or unfree are ultimately statements describing the individual's environment. As far as it goes, I think this is correct. But Berlin also argues that the only aspects of the environment that matter for this purpose are the presence or absence of external interference within the individual's sphere of private freedom, and here I agree with Skinner that Berlin is unconvincing. Skinner points out that a person could spend their entire life knowing that an external agent could intervene in their private affairs at any given time, and yet if they do not ever actually do so then the person lived a life of perfect liberty according to Berlin. But does it make sense to call such a person free? They live out their life in the knowledge that their non-interference is permanently at risk of violation according to an arbitrary external whim completely beyond their control. To my mind, it does not make sense to call such a person free. They have lived within social relationships characterized by a type of systemic domination that formed the very definition of master and slave in the Roman legal codes. Therefore, I will argue that it is a theory of negative liberty aiming at non-domination which should constitute a notion of liberty for the modern left.

On this civic republican account then, what it is to be free is to be able to govern one's private affairs independent of the arbitrary will of others. It is only through this consciousness of independence in private concerns that one can have the possibility of leading what could reasonably be described as a life of liberty and freedom to lead, in Sen's terms, a life of value that one has chosen for oneself. To borrow a phrase from Mill this time, individual citizens are free to experiment with modes of living only when this non-domination is felt to be secure.

If it is true that liberty is promoted by maximizing the feeling of security of non-intervention in private and self-regarding concerns, then the importance of understanding the sources of interference and domination becomes apparent. It is important because of the relation of liberty to necessity and contingency. As Berlin notes, to grasp the necessity of something (such as the laws of arithmetic) is to no longer really feel it as an obstacle to one's will. It would be absurd for a person to say that they are unfree because the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees and their will is that the sum be 210. The laws of nature and the necessity of things, once recognized as such, are not liberty-restricting, for they do not involve a will. It is only action by other human beings (which is contingent), mediated through the natural world which is potentially liberty-restricting. It is made so if it involves patterns of domination.

Before I can hope to further illuminate the importance of distinguishing between dominating and non-dominating forms of interference, I must briefly summarize my argument so far. I have argued, resting on Skinner, that non-interference isn't sufficient for liberty, and that non-domination is a better criterion. I then explained that to be free, in this 'civic republican' conception of negative liberty, is to possess a private sphere of freedom in self-regarding matters and to believe that one's independence is not subject to the arbitrary will of an external agent. Since to speak of a will is to speak of intentional human action which is contingent (and not of natural events governed

Republican Ideal

by necessary laws), it is only the existence of domination by the actions of other human beings (whether that domination itself is direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional) which matters for questions of liberty. Thus to be able to feel secure in one's independence from arbitrary will, one must have reasonable knowledge regarding the sources of potential interference (i.e. domination). Otherwise, an individual may mistake non-domination for domination and so live out their life like a fear-stricken Pagan farmer who twists and contorts his life in the belief that this will prevent an external agent from blighting his crops, ignorant of the true cause in the climate or the soil. Equally, individuals may tolerate hardships in the belief that these are necessary or 'natural' aspects of life, when in fact they are the effects of intentional human action (the problem of 'contented slaves'). Neither of these individuals we would consider free.

In modern and complex industrialized democracies it will be said that this model drawn from antiquity is inapplicable, since it unrealistically assumes that citizens are capable of classifying and understanding the many interdependent and causally complex forces impacting on their daily lives. In Athenian direct democracy, 20,000 citizens could assemble regularly to take decisions, with the influence of private caprice checked by moral surveillance. But the conception of liberty I am advocating does not require every citizen to be perfectly informed in this way. It can function with masses of information, time constraints and pervasive information asymmetries, by using signals. These signals serve as reliable 'information shortcuts' by providing citizens with good reasons to believe that political liberty is being protected within their community and that: interference in private concerns by external agents is restricted by constitutional safeguards; anyone willing such forms of interference must justify themselves according to criteria of 'public reasonableness' and so seek to replace arbitrariness with legitimacy; and lastly (and this is crucial especially for those on the left), the voices of all those whose vital interests are affected by such forms of interference are properly included in the debate over legitimacy.

In a well-ordered democratic republic, trusted public institutions (legislatures, executives, judiciaries, etc) are one important signal, but just as important are the less obvious signals embedded within social structures. Societies with substantial wealth inequality have a whole array of other correlated inequalities – such as incomes, outcomes in education and health, life expectancy, political participation. These sociological facts affect people's expectations and behaviour; in particular, they affect the level of public trust by shaping ideas about the balance of political power in the societies in which people live. If a society has an extremely large divergence of wealth amongst its citizenry, this can have two corrosive effects on political liberty. It can directly interfere with the vital signalling mechanisms of a republic by increasing the risk that wealthier factions are able to dominate less wealthy factions (explicitly through bribery and corruption of public offices, or tacitly through mobilising private resources to dominate deliberation and effectively exclude other voices). But it can also do this damage indirectly. This is because stark social inequalities can create the

expectation amongst less privileged groups that there is no point in expending energy participating in politics and public life because ultimately the rich and powerful will get their way. This damages trust in those involved in politics and breeds cynicism, but more importantly for this analysis it erodes, in multiple ways, the liberty of individual citizens and closes off avenues of human potentialities before they can be explored.

Lastly, I want to emphasise the consequences of my argument for issues surrounding reforms to the public sector. If there is anything worth taking away from this article, then I think we should recognize the limits inherent in the attempt to apply the idea of freedom-as-choice in the marketplace to public services. In a recent article for *Fabian Review*, Peter Kellner defended New Labour against charges that it had done too little to reduce income inequality on the basis that globalization constrained national governments in this arena, but it was less important in any case because, “if we can’t close the gap in money between rich and poor, we should devise ways to make money matter less.” This is New Labour’s policy on equality: beyond reducing the growth of the gap, New Labour focuses on reducing what I would call ‘private’ inequalities (that is, inequalities in individual outcomes such as levels of satisfaction with service provision, inequalities in the choices available between the public and private sectors, and inequalities in key quality of life indicators). This would be fine in itself if it weren’t for the fact that more ‘public’ inequalities (such as wealth and consumption lifestyles) serve to disrupt the signals essential to a well-functioning polity and that the freedom of individual choice we all enjoy in our private lives does depend, ultimately, on a well-functioning polity. This is not to argue that aren’t other reasons why we should support the reduction of ‘private’ inequalities, but merely to insist that there is a coherent conception of negative liberty which allows those of us on the left to take seriously the relation between values of equality and freedom in their fullest sense.

The republican ideal of liberty is an argument against factionalism and for pluralism and the widest dispersion of power. It is almost two centuries since Constant warned that we modern citizens may too easily “surrender our right to share in political power” in return for greater efficiency, or private happiness, or general well-being, forgetting that delegation to representatives demands “active and constant surveillance.” That is the liberal account, whereby interference to encourage or require participation in public affairs reduces freedom but increases it overall by preventing the violation of rights: such interventions are only of instrumental value in promoting liberty. I believe the civic republican conception has it right, however. Liberty demands individual self-development free from domination, and that requires us to ask the question: who is monitoring our representatives, and whose interests are they furthering when they do so? Do we live in a society that is ordered in such a way that we can reasonably believe the answers to these questions are: anyone who wishes to, and thus such monitoring and surveillance only furthers the public interest, not that of private individuals or factions at the expense of the rights of others?

Samuel Burt is a 2nd year PPE student at LMH and Co-Chair Elect of the Oxford University Labour Club

REFORM THE VOTE TO EMPOWER THE LEFT

PETER TATCHELL

Many left-wing defenders of Britain's corrupt voting system claim that electoral reform is irrelevant to ordinary people's lives. It's a middle class preoccupation, they say. What matters are policies on jobs, housing, education and health. Others concede that the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system is unfair but say that electoral reform is not a priority, given the recession and rising unemployment.

How wrong they are. Bad policies flow directly from the way the FPTP voting system allows parties with minority support to form majority governments and to then impose unpopular right-wing policies, like Thatcher's poll tax and Blair's Iraq war.

Most of the British public are left-of-centre on most issues. But their majority progressive opinions have often not been represented in parliament by a majority of MPs. Indeed, every government since 1950 – both Labour and Tory - has taken power based on less than 50% of the popular vote. None has won majority public support. Voters for progressive small parties, like the Greens, have no MPs at all. The electorate's generally progressive instincts have been frustrated time and time again. For more than four decades, most people have voted for parties broadly to the left of the political spectrum: Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and the Scottish and Welsh nationalists. The Conservatives have never commanded a majority of votes. Yet the voting system has excluded this progressive consensus from power for much of the last 40-plus years.

As a result of a fraudulent electoral method (FPTP), we have endured reactionary unmandated policies like Margaret Thatcher's stationing of US cruise missiles in the UK in the 1980s and like Gordon Brown's scrapping of the 10p tax rate for low income earners in 2008. The last general election, in 2005, was symptomatic of the cheating of the electorate's will. Labour won 35% of the vote but was rewarded with 55% of the seats. Of eligible voters, only 22% voted Labour. Yet Labour won a 66 seat majority. More people didn't vote (39%) than voted Labour. This is not democracy. It echoes the gerrymandering and ballot-rigging of two centuries ago, which galvanised the Chartists to campaign for a democratic, representative parliament.

The electoral process is 'rigged.' In 2005, it took an average 26,906 votes to elect a Labour MP, 44,373 to elect a Tory MP and 96,539 votes to elect a Lib Dem MP. Not since the rotten boroughs of the eighteenth century have elections been so corrupt.

This democratic deficit is a direct result of FPTP, which allows the election of MPs and governments with minority support. FPTP enabled Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair to win landslide majorities based on popular votes of only 35% to 44%.

If there was a fairer, proportional voting system, we would have never had the Margaret Thatcher and John Major governments and, as a result, nev-

er had “New” Labour and the ditching of socialism under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Recent political history would have been different - and better.

With proportional representation (PR), neither Thatcher and Major nor Blair and Brown would have been able to form stand-alone governments. Supported by only a minority of voters, they would have had to form coalitions, which would have curbed their policy excesses, such as the Iraq war.

If there had been PR in the 1980s, Thatcher would have had to go into coalition with the Lib Dems and other minor parties, which would have scuppered many of her reactionary policies. Alternatively, Labour might have been able to form a coalition with the Lib Dems and others, which would have meant no Conservative government in the 1980s – sparing Britain the social destruction of Thatcherism.

Some defenders of FPTP complain that if we switch to PR Labour might never again win a majority of seats and form a government in its own right. But if Labour can't persuade a majority of voters, it doesn't deserve to form a government (ditto the Tories). Democracy is supposed to be about the will of the majority. It cannot be reconciled with a voting system that persistently allows parties with minority support to form governments with huge majorities.

If the last three elections had been conducted under PR, Labour would not have won an overall majority of seats. But there would be Green MPs and more Lib Dem MPs. On many issues, these two parties are to the left of the Labour government. They would have had a radicalising influence. Blair and Brown would have been forced to depend on Lib Dem and Green support; probably resulting in no post office closures, Trident renewal, ID cards, expanded nuclear power, attacks on civil liberties, privatisation of public services and no British war in Iraq.

With PR, the Tories might never rule alone again; thereby preventing a repeat of Thatcherite extremism. We'd see the election of MPs representing the Greens and radical left parties, as happened under Scotland's PR system. This would shift the political centre leftwards. Labour would be radicalised because it would have to rule in coalition with radical left, Green and Lib Dem MPs. Despite their flaws, the Lib Dems are more left-leaning than Gordon Brown on many issues. Labour could end up more or less permanently in power as part of a radicalising coalition. This is infinitely preferable to having the Tories in government.

A democracy requires a parliament that reflects the people's will; where the proportion of seats won corresponds to the proportion of votes cast. This means finishing the parliamentary reform process begun by the Chartists. We need a new Chartist movement to secure PR and a representative parliament.

The Scottish Parliament election system is a practical example of a fairer electoral process. Electors vote for both a constituency MSP and for a party list. This combines the accountability of single member constituencies with additional 'top-up' MSPs

Vote Reform

based on the total list vote received by each party; thereby ensuring proportionality between the number of votes cast for a party and the number of seats it wins.

The practical effects are obvious. Faced with a fairer system, where every vote counts, the Scottish people have moved left, electing MSPs from the Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party. It has invigorated politics north of the border, and pushed the political consensus a bit further leftwards.

This system works in Scotland, why can't we have it at Westminster?

Polls show that a majority of people throughout Britain want a fairer electoral system. It would benefit Labour and the wider left. Gordon Brown should let the people decide. If he won't, perhaps we need to revive the Chartist tradition of extra-parliamentary protest, to challenge the political establishment and to ensure that we, the people, get what we deserve: a representative parliament and a government with majority popular support.

Peter Tatchell is a journalist and human rights activist. He writes regularly for the Guardian. For more information about Peter Tatchell's human rights campaigns and to make a donation go to his website at www.petertatchell.net

AN END TO LABOURISM

STUART WHITE

British politics is characterised today by crisis. Not just one crisis, but several. Most fundamentally, there is the emerging environmental crisis of climate change. Second, there is the ongoing economic crisis, precipitated in the financial system. Third, there is a crisis in the political system, epitomised by the controversy over MPs' expenses, but with much deeper roots. And fourth, there is a crisis within Labour. For the media, this is a crisis of leadership. But it is also, more fundamentally, a crisis of purpose, one might even say a crisis of meaning. What, after all, is Labour for?

Pragmatists in government might regard such questioning as idle. The present government has a ready answer to what Labour is for: it's there to manage crisis. The public expects us to 'get on with the job' of taking the country out of recession, to reform the political system, and so on. But this answer won't do. For one thing, it too easily evades the question of how far Labour itself is implicated in these crises. Did Labour's market-based conversion in the 1990s go to excess and lead to a failure to appreciate some old-fashioned insights about possibilities of market failure? Did Labour's traditional philosophy of the state, based on a conservative ideal of parliamentary sovereignty, contribute to the current crisis of the political system? Coming to terms with the crises requires Labour to take a hard look at its own, well-entrenched habits of thought.

Second, it is not as if there is one single right way to manage a crisis. There is opportunity — Rahm Emanuel recently said 'never let a crisis go to waste.' Just think of the way Margaret Thatcher used the severe economic crisis of the 1970s to launch a radical attack on the post-war settlement. There was nothing pre-determined about this. The crisis could have been managed in many other ways (with pluses and minuses relative to the Thatcher approach). But Thatcher and her supporters had a clear sense of what they were for. They had a reasonably clear sense of their values and a vision of the society they wanted to create. So they knew what they wanted to do with the crisis.

As I cannot address all of the crises here, let's focus on the political one and the opportunities it presents. First, the backdrop of Labour's competing conceptions of politics. It may be hard to credit, but Labour was born as a party dedicated to far-reaching political reform. Labour and the New Social Order, the party's first statement of aims and values, published in 1918, proposed a range of sweeping changes to the UK political system. However, Labour very quickly became a party of political conservatism. Having shoved the Liberals aside more emphatically than most of the Left might initially have expected, they emerged as one of the two major parties in a two-party system, Labour grew strongly attached to the established institutions of the British state. A distinctive 'Labourist' philosophy of politics and the state emerged which is still with us today.

An End to Labourism

Labourism starts with the assumption that Labour is properly the single representative of progressive opinion. Second, and particularly after the Second World War, Labour drifted towards a strong attachment to the power of the central state. The aim of progressive politics is, therefore, to get Labour control of the central state. Third, Labour became attached to a conservative parliamentarism. It embraced the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty and the existing first-past-the-post electoral system. For only this system could credibly hope to deliver Labour — and Labour alone — control of the all-important central state.

The Thatcher era, which saw radical reform pushed through on a minority of the popular vote, increased the sensitivity of Labour-aligned thinkers to the ills of 'elective dictatorship.' Labour's more pluralist and federalist approach to politics, which had been submerged in the 1920s, started to reassert itself. Initially, it looked as if New Labour might well incorporate this re-emerging pluralist and federalist approach. Devolution to Scotland and Wales remained an important objective, and one that was swiftly acted on after 1997. The first New Labour government established the Jenkins Commission to consider reform of the electoral system. Blair was clearly interested in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. However, the scale of Labour's victory in 1997, and its subsequent domination of electoral politics, tempted the party back into its familiar comfort zone. The report of the Jenkins Commission was politely but emphatically shelved. Talk of coalitional politics at Westminster evaporated.

In its second term, Labour began to speak about a 'new localism'. However, this was little more than Orwellian euphemism for old-style centralism. The centre remained firmly in control of what local decisions were to be devolved, to whom and on what terms. What central government determined one day, it could tear up the next. Retreating into this comfort zone was, of course, a Faustian pact for Labour. Under the first-past-the-post system, Labour can hope to form parliamentary majorities in a way it can't under a proportional electoral system.

But to do so it must win over floating voters in a relatively small number of competitive constituencies. These voters have policy preferences on the centre-right — arguably to the right of the nation's median voter. So Labour's dominance in parliamentary terms demands a policy platform that tracks to the centre-right. Over time, this generates confusion and disillusionment. It helps explain why we have reached a point where we have to ask the question: 'What is Labour for?'

At the same time, the existing system has growing problems of legitimacy. Although electoral turnout shows a downward trend in many countries, the decline in the UK since New Labour came to office has been unusually severe. As the main parties jostle for that elusive centre-right floating voter, the range of political choice declines.

Citizens are inclined then to ask an even more basic and worrying question: 'What is politics for?' The scandal over MPs' expenses has produced a rare moment in British politics. Basic questions about the nature and structure of the

political system have left the seminar room. Again, the crisis presents opportunity. The opportunity is to fundamentally reshape the political system to make it more accountable and empowering. Proposals for reform are bouncing off the walls: fixed-term parliaments; electoral reform; 'open primaries' for candidate selection; new proposals for devolution of power to the local level.

One approach is for the Labour government to huddle in on itself, decide which of these proposals it likes, and present a constitutional reform package to Parliament. This is the direction in which Gordon Brown appears to be going with his proposed National Council for Democratic Renewal. This would be a mistake. It fails to see how the process of reform must itself address the problem that has prompted the demand for change: the disconnection between public and political elite — indeed, a disconnection between many people and democratic politics itself.

There is also a basic matter of principle here. If we are — finally — accepting the idea that the people are sovereign, and this is a moment of constitutional change, then shouldn't the people have some real, active involvement in determining the course of change? Instead of convening a National Council for Democratic Renewal which will tell the people what constitutional reforms are good for them, a coalition of organisations has argued that the government should organise an inclusive and deliberative process that will enable the public to present its own ideas for reform.

Key here is the idea of a citizens' convention similar, though probably on a larger scale, to the Demos citizen's convention held recently on MPs allowances. This would bring together an assembly of people, chosen at random, to deliberate about the future of the political system. Their deliberation would be assisted by specialists and advocates who could put the cases for and against alternative proposals. Participants would listen to the experts, talk about the issues between themselves, and develop their own proposals. These proposals might then go to a referendum.

Of course, the numbers involved in the convention itself would be small (100-300). So the convention itself would need to be embedded in a wider consultation, ideally going right down to each neighbourhood, each community centre and hall. Underpinning this approach is a distinctive philosophy of the state, a radical alternative to Labourism, with much wider relevance to addressing our present crises.

This alternative is the philosophy of democratic republicanism, whose aim is to disperse property and power amongst individuals, but also to reinvigorate the public sphere by expanding the arenas of democratic decision-making and by encouraging active citizen involvement in these arenas. In the economic sphere, it directs our attention back to the much-neglected issue of the distribution of wealth (not just income, but wealth) and to the even more neglected question of how those who control the allocation of wealth through investment can be made more accountable to ordinary savers.

And it certainly has relevance to the incipient environmental crisis: it is only an active, campaigning citizenship, akin to that repre-

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sented by the Transition Towns and Climate Camp movements, which is likely to bring pressure to bear for serious action on climate change.

Democratic republicanism has always been a dissident strain in Labour thinking. Part of connecting with this tradition, however, is changing the way Labour does politics itself. It means less top-down definition of policy and more attention to how Labour can help organise and participate in movements for reform from the bottom-up. It means letting go of the arrogant and false idea that Labour has a monopoly on progressive politics. It means that Labour has to connect with and give critical support to a wider citizen activism for a more socially responsible and thereby free, and equal, society. This, at least in part, is what Labour is for.

Stuart White is Lecturer in Politics at Jesus College and Director of the Oxford University Public Policy Unit. He is a co-signatory to the 2003 founding document of Compass, 'A Vision for the Democratic Left'.

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SEPERATISM AND THE LABOUR ALTERNATIVE

CAILEAN GALLAGHER

The Scottish Parliament restored to the people of Scotland sovereignty that was long over-due. Scotland had retained its own institutions of church, law and education since the Union of 1706, and had subsequently developed its own bodies of administration and governance. Devolution simply acknowledged the institutional and political identity of Scotland as compared to the rest of the UK.

The three main parties, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the SNP are all centre-left parties. For the first eight years a Lab-Lib coalition pursued a steady centre-left agenda based on a strong public sector and egalitarian delivery of services, reflective of the Scottish left-wing consensus.

The trouble was that the Scottish Labour Party became a party that was capable only of governing. So defeat at the hands of the nationalists in 2007 left them reeling; a shock from which the Left in Scotland has still to fully recover. Labour has struggled to be a party of opposition. Complacent in its own moderate leftism, its vision for Scotland extends only to providing high quality public services.

Meanwhile, the SNP have played single-issue politics. The Nationalists' untempered populism meant that Scottish political instincts meant policy remained egalitarian, but mean that much of Labour's quiet achievements were swept aside for headline policies. The agenda of the SNP is two-fold: first, to redefine politics away from a social spectrum to one of sovereignty, whereby voters decide based on nothing but their attitudes towards independence; second, to gradually persuade the public of the reliability and potential of an independent Scotland.

The first aim has been met – by setting the agenda and making the most of every reference to independence, the SNP have boosted the profile of the independence debate. The SNP are working very hard to make independence sound like an inevitable progression, and it seems to be working. Although most people in Scotland are not convinced independence will improve their lives, the debate has become more than just dogmatic – people have views on whether education will get better under independence. The trick for the nationalists was to move from being a question of 'why independence?' to 'why not independence?' Far from "killing nationalism stone dead" as predicted by ex-Defense minister George Robertson, it has meant that there is a continuous debate about what Scottish people want.

Many on the Left seek ways of neutralizing the independence threat. The Guardian suggested holding a snap referendum, perhaps on the day of the general election, to settle the matter. This was also the view of the last leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Wendy Alexander.

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However, such a move is defeatist, and undemocratic. If a vote is held without a settled opinion, then democracy is being preempted and manipulated. A debate of the seriousness of independence is healthy in any society; the problem is the timidity with which the Left have responded. Instead of presenting a positive alternative to separation, the weakness of personality and vision in Labour has left it with a largely negative campaign strategy. It has also made the ongoing 'National Conversation' – the 'consultation' with the Scottish public – distinctly one-sided. The Nationalists say again and again the justice of their goal. The only option for the Left is to present an alternative to independence. Whilst the SNP pander to the collectivist populace, their main aim is economic growth, and their main sponsors are businesses seeking to benefit from an independent market, Labour's roots are firmly planted in the councils, and in the large public sector, that thrive across Scotland.

Nye Bevan was opposed to devolution on the grounds that a smaller state cannot provide as just and equal a society as a large one. Yet the recent history of democratic statism, especially in a two-party system, shows that parties and ideologies drift to the centre. While English voters are increasingly right-wing, the agenda in Scotland remains firmly distributive – free prescription charges and paid university fees are received by everyone, while Thatcherite measures are finally being rejected in favour of more collectivity – the scrapping of the right to buy council houses being a case in point.

Bevan's belief relied upon an egalitarian public service, providing the same for every individual. The English approach separate boards controlling individual hospitals and setting their own agendas without a clear connecting framework of linkage, make the English system very far from what Bevan intended. In Scotland, although not one homogeneous body, the NHS is divided into regions whose specialists and general managers can approach care and public health at a higher level, and can better coordinate development of health equalities, specialist treatment, and collaboration between police, doctors, social workers and other public sector workers. If it can be done in health, it can be done in economic coordination with universities for renewable investment; it can be done in linking infrastructure with access groups; it can provide vocational opportunities and cross-industry work experience. Socialism requires such planning, rather than outcomes based on figures, to have a systemic and long-term effect.

None of this will be aided by independence. They are socialist structures on a regional level that operate regardless, and they face no resistance from Whitehall. It is for the Left in Scotland to focus on these aims, actively and democratically, and not be distracted by the Nationalists' populism.

It is likely that before long Holyrood will have power to raise tax, and will have control of social security. Indeed, it is democratically just – a majority of Scots favour this so-called 'devo-max' approach. But it is within, not without, the economic Union that a form of socialism can best flourish. Events of the past crisis indicate that economies of small nations really do struggle, and the col-

lapse of RBS and HBOS struck full blows to confidence in Scotland's economy.

There is potential in Scotland for a form of democratic socialism unrealized elsewhere. Whether or not it is within a more devolved or an independent state is up to the Scottish people. But the Left in Scotland must embrace the strong regional and structural institutions that make Scotland so unique, and so suited to a democratic socialist society.

Cailean Gallagher is a First Year studying PPE at Balliol College, and editor-in-chief of the Oxford Left Review.

PUTNEY AND THE 'HISTORY OF THE LEFT'

MATTHEW KENNEDY

*'The history of the "Putney debates" and "the Levellers" in the twentieth century has been the history of political faith...Rainsborough and the poorest he that was in England became part of the history of [this faith] part of a history of England which socialists could construct...the question of what happened at Putney inescapably merges with the question of whether and in what sense we continue to believe in democracy at all, in an age when globalism abolishes sovereignty and post-modernism identity.'*¹

In 2006, the Guardian newspaper ran a poll of its readers to find out what they thought were the most radical moments in British history. 'The Putney Debates' of 1647 was the winner, with 285 votes. The idea that historical events should be prioritised according to the vague criterion of 'radical', and that it is the public (all 285 of them) who should decide, is a departure from the professional consensus. So, some post-modernism may have put paid to Ranke's idea that the purpose of the historian is to tell history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* [as it actually happened] but, for many, this is the historians primary task. The Guardian competition, if anything, represents a step 'backwards' from the Rankean position rather than a confirmation of the post-modern monopoly. In running the competition, the Guardian was consciously engaging in a sort of neo-Whiggish historiography. Whilst Macaulay had sought to reveal the ribbon of English civility and liberty running through history, the Guardian sought out a more 'subversive' side of English history. They might have been looking for different things, but neither made any bones about their desire to write history - not as it was but, rather, as it should be. In both cases, the dice were weighted before they were thrown. It is the historiographical equivalent of saying: 'I always knew this would happen'. No you didn't! You couldn't have known this would happen: you have prioritised events and incidents which - at the time - were insignificant, to form a narrative which allows you to 'understand' how you've got to the present point. It is bad history -but - 'to understand all is to forgive all.'

The writing of history must be a question of prioritisation. There is simply too much of it. It would be impossible to give equal treatment to everything you knew about something. Any such attempt would deteriorate quickly into a farcical list of facts and figures. Moreover, this is not what the historian is trying to do. The historian is not 'giving you the facts'. He, or she, is explaining the facts; their relations to each other. He or she is interpreting them. This, inevitably, has its dangers. It would be naive to suggest that anyone could approach a body of 'facts' or 'evidence' without any preconceived notions of what they might find. Our perception of the past, of 'what happened', is inextricably bound up with our understanding of the present. All history is contemporary history, as Croce said. However, some subjects are more susceptible to interference than others.

The Putney Debates and the Levellers are prime examples. We might do well to re-

¹ J.G.A. Pocock, 'The True Leveller's standard revisited' in Mendle (ed.) *The Putney Debates of 1647* (Cambridge, 2001)

member that (a) the Putney debates were never called that by the participants (it was just another meeting of the Council of Officers of the New Model Army), and (b) the debate on the franchise only happened by pure chance. Woolrych has described Ireton's raising of the issue of the franchise as 'a tactical blunder' and Rainsborough, by his own admission, wasn't meant to be there. The Levellers had modified the franchise proposal between the publication of the Case of the Army Truly Stated and the first Agreement of the People, doubtless in response to the objections of the Council of Officers to the provisions contained in the latter (perhaps the most explicit statement of universal enfranchisement in all the Leveller writings'). If anything, the Levellers themselves saw the 'Whitehall Debates' of the following year as more significant. '

The Putney Debates' as a chapter in the history of democracy are a construct of the historical imagination. They have become important because there are visible glimpses of things which are today important to us: freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of conscience, equality before the law, universal franchise. In this respect, the history of the 'Putney Debates' and, indeed, the whole 'radical history' of Britain, as set out by the Guardian, is less history and more genealogy. It explains why we are the way we are today, and it legitimates it. This should not surprise us. We narrate all the time. It is the way we create meaning out of an otherwise meaningless series of unconnected events. It is the antidote to Rudge's crushing indictment that history is "just one fucking thing after another."

White has argued that narrativisation is ontological, that the creation of an historical narrative answers a very human need. In the case of the individual, the process of internal narrativisation is so natural as to go unnoticed. The 'need' in smaller groups is the more acute due to their self-conscious minority status. Perhaps the best example of a group act of attempted narrativisation is the Old Testament. The British Left is in no less need of an 'official' history. As Perry Anderson has noted, the history of the British Left is particularly problematic for a teleological view of history. It exists only in fits and starts. Anderson attributes this as much to the peculiarities of the emergent British bourgeoisie as the working classes. Unlike in other European cultures, the bourgeois 'intellectuals' never deigned to mobilise nascent working class consciousness. They were content to assimilate vertically with the upper-classes and defend their position from the multitude below. This, Anderson argues, retarded the development of the British left from its very beginnings. The need for an authoritative history is, therefore, only the more pronounced.

Whilst the Guardian's 'Top 5 Radical Moments in British History' might be 'bad' history by the standards of professional historiography, it is a telling indicator of the continuing insecurity of the British Left. The Tories might have no idea where they are going, but they certainly know where they come from. If the British Left is to meet the political, social and economic challenges of the 21st century, it needs to know where it came from as well as where it is going. If it fails to recognise where it came from, it will fail those it was born to help.

Matthew Kennedy is a History Finalist at St. Hugh's and the Editor of The Oxford Forum and Political Officer of Compass Oxford.

ZAPATERO'S CIVIC REPUBLICANISM: A FOURTH WAY FOR LABOUR?

JEREMY CLIFFE

"Should welfare be delivered by the state or by greater delegation to the private and voluntary sectors? [...] Should welfare be universal or more targeted - and how might a shift to greater targeting impinge upon social democratic values? [...] In this way, the Third Way can diverge on means - and the choice of means in each of these cases will affect the character of the ends reached."

Thus Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, writing in 2001, expressed the problematic nature of the politics of triangulation; its inherent openness to interpretation, its vague priorities, its shift away from emancipatory politics. The crucial flaw, witnessed by the quandaries above, was the difficulty of creating what Anthony Giddens called a new 'life politics', a varied mesh of positive and negative forms of liberty, suspended between the communitarianism of the former and the Classical Liberalism of the latter. The successes - and failures - of this thinking, as applied by New Labour, have been well documented.

But did this centrist mesh really merit the term Third Way? In his landmark Republicanism, *A Theory of Freedom and Government*, first published in 1997, the Irish political theorist Philip Pettit outlined a Third Way of sorts, but one which departs from that articulated by the likes of Giddens and John Gray, outlining an alternative to the conventional duopoly of positive and negative liberties. In Republicanism, Pettit presents a third form, 'liberty as non-domination', defined as the absence of arbitrary interference practiced at will and with impunity. It is ultimately distinct from both other forms of liberty, and it is this that commends it as a truly alternative approach to other attempts to codify a break from the binary politics of the twentieth century.

This essay will consider the virtues of republicanism as a political ideal, with particular reference to its direct application under the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in Spain. The question of whether or not it merits the term 'Fourth Way' is open for debate, but insofar as it represents a coherent, distinct response to the flaws of the Third Way, beyond both traditional dirigisme and laissez-faire liberalism, the argument is there to be made.

First though, the case for republican liberty. As Pettit puts it, this has "one conceptual element in common with the negative conception [of liberty] – the focus on absence, not presence – and one element in common with the positive: the focus on mastery, not interference." That is to say, it prizes a form of individual independence akin to that promoted by supporters of negative liberty, albeit independence from arbitrary interference in an individual's choices, predicated on non-domination rather than non-interference per se. Thus, some forms of interference (those that are not arbitrary and are exercised in the name of non-domina-

tion of the individual) are admissible within a republican system, which allows for the existence of a non-mastering interferer but not for that of a non-interfering master. Pettit defines 'mastering' or 'domination' as "the capacity to interfere on an arbitrary basis in certain choices that the other is in a position to make".

As such, the quality of an individual's choice (his or her ability to make the choice in circumstances of non-domination) is more important than the sheer quantity of choice available. The latter may be sacrificed in the interest of the former: "Those who are attached to the ideal of non-interference value the fact of having choice – the fact of non-interference – whether the choice is dominated or not; those who embrace the ideal of non-domination value the fact of having undominated choice, but not necessarily the fact of having choice as such."

An excellent example of the difference between non-interference and non-domination in practice is Pettit's comparison of the application of both forms of liberty to cases of industrial action: "The ideal of freedom as non-interference has always been invoked, usually in the context of free contracts of employment, to make a case against collective industrial action by workers. Such action is a form of interference, of course, since it involves coercion or active obstruction. And on the face of it the strike is a form of interference that is provoked on the employer side: after all, employers increase their wishes only in negotiating free contracts, not necessarily by any form of coercion of force or even manipulation. The ideal of freedom as non-domination gives a very different cast to collective action. Let us suppose that individual contracts of employment are wrested from workers under the spectre of destitution, and that they put the employer in a position of domination relative to employees. The resort to collective action, in such a situation, may represent the only hope of winning freedom as non-domination for those who are employed."

To further explore the precise nature of republican liberty, it is worth looking at its relation to positive and negative liberties: in contrast to positive liberty, it is based on a form of independence, of absence of interference, but in contrast to negative liberty it considers some forms of interference admissible. For example, in *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine argues that "our newly arrived emigrants [would soon form] into society, the reciprocal blessings of which would supercede, and render the obligations of law and government unnecessary while they remained perfectly just to each other; but as nothing but Heaven is impregnable to vice, it will unavoidably happen that in proportion as they surmount the first difficulties of emigration, which bound them together in a common cause, they will begin to relax in their duty and attachment to each other: and this remissness will point out the necessity of establishing some form of government to supply the defect of moral virtue"

So the initial "natural liberty" does not entitle each according to ability to impose his will upon each according to vulnerability. Its essence is not one of libertinism, but a state of non-domination. And if one member of the proto-society at one moment is able to exercise an advantage over a weaker one, the aggregate 'liberty' (the aggregate 'non-domination') falls. The aggressor too becomes less free – he is

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no less dominated than before, but the prospect of himself or one of his kin later becoming victim to such an aggression in a state of weakness diminishes his non-domination. Everyone in a society is susceptible to periods of vulnerability, and without support (support which may imply others suffering the non-arbitrary interference of the state in the form of redistribution) the vulnerable become subject to the arbitrary will of others. To fail to support those suffering such vulnerability therefore diminishes everyone. An individual's material goods are connected to his or her state of non-domination, but (and this is the key difference between republicanism and the blanket non-interference of Classical Liberalism) there is no absolute contiguity between the two. Thus, when the size of the society's population makes regulations and then laws and government necessary, these best reflect the idyllic state of "natural liberty" by maximising non-domination rather than non-interference. Republicanism codifies this doctrine of non-domination.

To reiterate, the essential point here for the left is that republicanism appeals to today's mode for non-interference, but nuances it. It defines substantial material inequality as unacceptable where this inequality submits one individual wholly to the will of another – insofar as it makes a liber a servus. After all, the American Revolution is a symbol of republican freedom; its slogan was not just "no taxation" but "no taxation without representation". Taxation without representation implies the arbitrary imposition of another's will; tax with representation does not. Therefore, in an economically unequal, laissez-faire society, non-domination is greatly limited as all citizens could potentially find themselves one day (through their own actions or fate) in a state of material shortage without the ability to draw on social support. The mere prospect of this state diminishes the republican freedom of every member of that society. What is more, as Stuart White puts it, "wealth inequality can lead directly to relationships of domination. If the poor rely on the rich for subsistence, then the rich can use this dependency to lord it over the lives of the poor."

A society successfully organised along republican lines, in contrast, guarantees a minimum of personal and material wherewithal as a basis of non-domination, that is: socio-economic independence, or as Amartya Sen puts it, "the power to participate in the social life of the community". This republican state treats all citizens as equals; when it targets one part of society for particular attention, it does so in the name of universal non-domination. As such, as Pettit argues, republicanism is in certain respects inherently communitarian: "the goal of freedom as non-domination gives a common cause to each of the salient vulnerability classes in any contemporary society [...] The closer we approximate to the enjoyment of perfect non-domination, then, the more common that ideal will become." To summarise, the opposite of republican liberty is not interference but domination; the individual at liberty is not a socio-economic libertine, but a non-dominated citizen; republicanism means liberty by the laws, not liberty from the laws.

Yet despite the eminent suitability of this republican framework, combining independence and interdependence, to the goals and context of today's left, the 'liberal communitarianism' of New Labour and the Third Way failed to adopt its

key tenants, in particular the importance of structural egalitarianism. As such, where Labour has failed to reverse levels of poverty and exclusion in the UK this goes beyond the need to go further with the likes of the laudable Sure Start centres and income and child tax credits; it also speaks of structural tendencies: tax by stealth, intransigence on electoral reform, the individualist “your family better off” rhetoric; in short New Labour’s arguably nebulous ideological basis.

Indeed, it is a shame that Republicanism did not have the impact in the UK that it has had in Spain, where it has formed the blueprint for a radical shift in the relationship between individual and state. Before he came to power, Zapatero promised to govern Spain according to principles expressed in the book, and has since made good his promise, adopting this theory to provide intellectual continuity across the policy spectrum.

The rigour with which Pettit’s theories have been applied since the 2004 election has been astonishing. The American political scientist, Robert B. Talisse wrote of Zapatero that “Not since the glory days of Russell and Dewey have we seen public political philosophy conducted on this level.” Pettit was invited to join the committee that drafted the Socialist manifesto for the 2008 election, and to assess the success of the government’s first term according to the criteria set out in his book. He concluded that he was “very impressed by the Zapatero government” and “Zapatero thinks it is very important to put your colors up in public to show where you’re going and what your principles are”. In particular Pettit highlighted progress on women’s rights, civil rights, a blanket amnesty for 800,000 immigrants, new democratic accountability, increases to the minimum wage, new workplace rights, job security and devolution to the regions – all moves that, he argued, together increased the individual citizen’s non-domination. In its first term the government also presided over the most stable period in industrial relations for a generation, almost doubled investment in education and R&D, tripled Spain’s overseas development aid, built the world’s most extensive high-speed rail network, and employed the language of republican liberty in presenting these and in weaving a broader narrative about citizenship and the good society: in an interview in 2007 Zapatero said “liberty as non-interference is fine if you live on an island alone but it’s not enough if you live in a polis, amongst others” and “What do liberals want power for? To do nothing? After all, that’s their ideal, non-interference, hoping that the blind and solitary forces of the market will sort everything out. Theoretically that might seem acceptable, but in practice, in people’s lives, there aren’t blind forces but eyes wide open, trying to dominate others, forces that sometimes are prepared to risk the health of others or that of the planet. And, this real context, the absence of interference, the absence of laws and government, produces the freedom of the jungle. To me it seems more realistic to go with freedom based on laws, just laws made by democratic processes.”

It hasn’t been perfect – Spain’s long-term housing bubble burst with the onset of the financial crisis, increasing Spain’s already-high marginal unemployment rate – but today Zapatero remains ahead of his conservative opponents in the polls, with a number of nation-changing achievements to his name. In 2008 the Guard-

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ian published a series of articles looking the country's success relative to right-wing Italy. "Spain has overtaken Italy in far more than just its gross domestic product" wrote John Hooper, highlighting the country's newfound cultural vibrancy, the "surge of women into Spain's labour market" and the introduction of "full-blown gay marriage ahead of even the Scandinavian nations". Some of the evidence of the past six years is more workaday: from the renovation of civic spaces to a decline in the use of the formal, submissive 'usted' form of address, but the effect of Republicanism can undoubtedly be felt across Zapatero's Spain today.

Returning to the UK, and Pettit's book, it's worth noting the contrast. The political scientist Daniel Leighton wrote in the *Soundings* journal that "[Republicanism] offers what was so glaringly absent from New Labour's Third Way, namely a robust theory of the common good and the institutional and socio-cultural requirements for articulating and sustaining it" and that "it offers a more nuanced understanding of power than the power-blind Third Way on one the hand, and the total critique of power that underpins much neo-Marxist theorising on the other." He concludes his review with a damning assessment: "New Labour has failed to constitute the State so that it is non-dominating or shown much interest in using it to undermine the relationships of domination that characterise so many areas of contemporary society. As such it has further undermined confidence in the public realm and the possibility that the State could be an agent of progressive change" The justice of this excoriating condemnation of New Labour is a matter for debate, but it is worth noting that Leighton's conclusion was born out by the recent study by John Curtice that showed that "One of the consequences of the New Labour shift to the centre is it has moved the electorate to the right."

To conclude, quite apart from the past successes and failures of the Third Way in the UK, it is clear that Labour has at least something to learn for the future from Pettit's conception of a renewed republican political ideal. Zapatero has shown the merits of the theory in practice and, notwithstanding the differences between the British and Spanish political systems, one has the impression that 'liberty as non-dominion' could offer Labour too the opportunity to better define itself and the politics of the left. Appealing both to individualist and collectivist instincts, redistributive but not arbitrarily so, and responding to the ongoing need for electoral, economic and social reform in the UK, Pettit's republicanism may just offer the basis for a Fourth Way on which Labour could embark in the next parliamentary term.

Jeremy Cliffe is a Modern Languages finalist at Worcester College. He chairs Compass Oxford and is Associate Editor of the Oxford Left Review.

GERMANY'S FRAGMENTED LEFT

BRIAN MELICAN

As odd as it may sound to some, Germany is and has long been a very left-wing country. Bismarck's Prussia with its health and unemployment insurance, the Nazis with their public works programmes, the GDR: the dictatorships that made the German twentieth century so painful were by and large based on left-leaning populism and the Gleichheitsgedanke (belief in equality) that still characterises Germany today; the major difference being that Germans, for a long time, were quite happy to allow the political class to be exempt from equality and above the law. This is what historians mean by a tradition of absolutism and authoritarianism in Germany as opposed to one of democracy and participation in France, the United States and Britain.

Germany today, however, has a young but vibrant democratic tradition; so vibrant, in fact, that new parties can rise to government within ten years. The most recent such addition to the political spectrum is Die Linke, a party that has annexed the far-left of the largest left-wing party, the SPD, and married it to former communists. In so doing, it has thrown the German Left into disarray and made it incapable of governing the country, splitting any conceivable left-of-centre majority into bitterly opposed factions, thus driving 'die Mitte' ('Middle Germany') into the waiting arms of the centre-right.

This situation bears comparison to the early eighties. Exactly thirty years ago, it was another party that set up shop just to the left of the SPD and created such ideological chaos that the Left was out of government for 16 long years: the Greens. Occupying far-left territory vacated by SPD-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's increasingly centrist realpolitik, they campaigned against the expansion of Frankfurt Airport, the adoption of nuclear power and the stationing of Pershing missiles on German soil. By 1982, they had 5.6% of the vote and were in the Bundestag - and a good 4% of that vote came directly from the SPD. Just like Die Linke today, the Greens saw themselves as a party of opposition, ideologically unable to compromise in a coalition. Thus any possibility of a left-of-centre government was destroyed by the left splitting its vote and scaring swing voters off to the right.

The fundamental lesson of Die Linke and the Greens is that periods of left-wing government in Germany lead to a split in the Left. In government, the SPD is simply incapable of fulfilling the more radical demands emanating from its own natural electorate: in the 80s, the fault-line was atomic policy and defence; in the 00s, it has been social policy.

With German reunification came a temporary exception to this trend, the events of 1989-1990 leading to a hiatus in the political tendencies of the previous decades. The Greens and their concerns for the environment were suddenly of little interest in those heady days in which the West German model of the social market economy seemed to have triumphed so definitively, and

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their percentage of the vote slipped from 8.3 to 3.8 in the 1990 elections. In the East, the battered remnants of that rare species, ideologically convinced communists, reformed under the flag of the PDS and polled a disastrous 2.4%.

Yet this return to confidence in the German interpretation of post-war capitalism did not last long: by the 1994 elections, much of the far Left in the West had regained its scepticism and returned to the Greens (back up to 7.3%). In the East, meanwhile, the catastrophic consequences of integration into the West German economic structure were already manifest; the new hordes of unemployed, brought up to expect the state to provide them with work, were already experiencing nostalgia for the GDR, and the PDS near doubled its vote.

In 1998, however, voter drifts to the hard Left were once again arrested. In terms of the public mood, there are striking parallels to the situation in the UK one year previous: a tired and battered right-wing government is smashed by a left-centrist party revitalised by a charismatic pragmatist.

Just like Blair, the new SPD leader Gerhard Schröder was anxious to please middle-class voters and aware of the danger of too much radicalism. Moreover, not only would Germany's budget - already seriously compromised by reunification - not have been able to handle any further extension of the welfare state, but Schröder was ideologically opposed to it in any case. Just as Labour in Britain turned "unemployment benefit" into "job-seekers' allowance", Schröder's reforms turned the *Arbeitsamt* (office for work) into the *Arbeitsagentur* (agency for work). The aim of these "third way" policies in both countries was to radically change the nature of the relationship between the individual and the state: the "jobless" would become the "jobseekers", thereby ingraining in their name their responsibility to look for work; meanwhile in Germany, the "office", a state-run bureaucracy, was to be turned into an "agency", a word with distinctly private-sector connotations.

This was just one of a whole bundle of measures packaged under the term Agenda 2010, whose aim was nothing less than to turn Germany into a liberal market economy with an efficient but basic welfare-state. German unemployment benefit, for example, previously exceptionally generous, was reformed under the mantle of the Hartz laws, placing the newly jobless on a progressively declining allowance with an unreasonable refusal to accept a new employment contract leading to the termination of all benefits. Here, Schröder openly made clear his intellectual debt to the British reforms of the late 90s and just as in Britain, all this was intended to incentivise the individual to work; yet unlike Britain, Germany did not experience notable economic growth until 2005, and even then job-creation remained well below expected levels. This meant that the living standards of the long-term unemployed sank rapidly and the new measures to get them into work remained essentially ineffectual.

A slew of embarrassingly unpopular ideas followed, including the notorious "one euro jobs", whereby the jobless were forced to work for one euro an hour in addition to their benefits. The Schröder government mumbled something

about “keeping the long –term unemployed in contact with the job market”; the public heard “keeping them off the statistics” and “vindictive exploitation”.

In Britain, reform of unemployment benefit was widely accepted, and the debate about to what extent these reforms and to what extent exceptional economic growth were at the root of magically low jobless figures is only now beginning in the light of the recession. Nevertheless, it remains arguable whether there would ever have been widespread acceptance of these reforms in Germany, even with a larger measure economic growth: not only is the percentage of the unemployed much greater (even now, with historically low unemployment, Germany is at 8%, while Britain remained around 3% for much of the 00s), but the German political spectrum is simply further left than in Britain. (In a telling linguistic example, the British say “nanny state” and cringe, whilst what the Germans call the Vater Staat - or “father state” - has a warm, fuzzy connotation. This was the case in West Germany even before the addition of 16 million citizens socialised under communism.)

Indeed, it was indignation against Agenda 2010 in the former West that really was the catalyst for the most recent split in the left: the dissatisfied former communists in the East seemed to have reached their ceiling at 5% in 1998, their vote shrinking back to 4% in 2002. Yet Schröder’s radical attempts to turn citizens and their offices into consumers and agencies awoke serious resistance on the far left of his own party. His brusque personal manner, characterised recently by the new General Secretary of the SPD Andrea Nahles as “testosterone-fuelled”, married to his own personal misunderstandings with the very left-of-centre Oscar Lafontaine, gave birth to the disenchanted splinter group under the leadership of this latter. Lafontaine, a tough-talking, affable rogue from the coal-mining Saarland went on to surprise almost everyone except himself by forming an alliance with the former communists of the PDS in 2005.

The gamble paid off. In the elections of that year, the eastern half of this new alliance brought its 4% from 2002, the western half took about the same percentage of the vote directly from the SPD: 2002 had seen the SPD on 38.5% and the PDS on 4.0%; in 2005, the SPD slipped to 34.2% and the PDS/Lafontaine grouping hit 8.7%, putting them safely over the 5% required to take up seats in the Bundestag and creating a third parliamentary left-wing party, officially enshrined in 2007 as Die Linke. The Greens, meanwhile, hovered consistently around the 8.0%-mark, underlining that, despite their participation in the now deeply unpopular Schröder government, they could rely on a loyal set of core voters.

In terms of numbers, the 2005 election gave a clear mandate to a left-of-centre government; but the percentage of votes transferred to Die Linke also made it clear that Germans were not as willing to play fast-and-loose with the term “Left” as the British. Since a coalition with Die Linke would have been salt in the wounds of the SPD, and since the habitual coalition parties of the right, the CDU and FDP, did not have sufficient votes to form a government, the SPD entered into a Grand Coalition with the conservative CDU. Whilst this politically explosive move functioned far better than expected on an operational level

The German Left

through until last year's elections, it has been the ideological death of the SPD.

Outflanked on the left by Die Linke and tethered to several right-wing policies by the terms of the coalition agreement of 2005, the SPD lost all ability to correct its course to win back the voters it was haemorrhaging. To make matters worse, much of the credit for the laudable left-wing initiatives undertaken by the SPD in the Grand Coalition has been shared with the CDU which, aware of the colour of the vote in 2005, and recognising the signs of the times in the wake of the financial crisis, has been careful to tone down its formerly somewhat neo-liberal attitudes.

Since periods of SPD government in the past have been unable to satisfy the far Left, the effect of a period of SPD government with additional right-wing flavour was not hard to predict: the 2009 election saw the SPD slip to a catastrophic 23%, a figure that sent shock-waves through the whole country. Die Linke, meanwhile, increased their share of the vote to 12%, with the Greens gaining as well to cross the 10%-mark. Despite the headline-grabbingly huge gains made by Die Linke at the expense of the SPD, an analysis of the results shows that for the first time since 1998, there is in sheer numerical terms no longer a left-wing majority in the Bundestag. In essence, the CDU – pulled left by the SPD as much as it held the SPD to the right – lost much of its hard-core free-market voters to the neo-liberal FDP (which polled a record 14.6%), whilst picking up voters on the right of the SPD. So if anything, the 2009 election can be read as a polarisation not only of the German left, but of German society as a whole. A large minority of Germans thinks that the reforms of the last years have not gone far enough and are voting for the Reaganite FDP. The other large minority are so dissatisfied with the SPD's Agenda 2010 programme that they have deserted Europe's oldest social-democratic party for an unpredictable upstart with several candidates tainted by a communist doctrinaire past.

It would be tempting at this point to draw the conclusion here that the German democratic tradition, young as it is, is too weak in some quarters of the left – especially in the East – and that the German far Left is as happy as it ever was to allow whatever is needed if it promises a strong state to guarantee equality. That would be clearly alarmist and, except for a few very hard-line elements, wrong. Nevertheless it remains the case the German Left in general is, quite rightly, concerned at the pace with which its own representatives moved with the neo-liberal zeitgeist of the 00s, blurring the lines between left and right and actively participating in changing the relationship of the individual and the state from citizen-vs.-government to consumer-vs.-provider – even if these changes have been much less far-reaching, and undertaken in a society situated generally further to the Left, than either in the United States or Britain.

Brian Melican is a freelance journalist and a graduate of Merton College, where he read Modern Languages between 2003 and 2007. He has written for the Financial Times Deutschland, Handelsblatt and the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung. He also hosts a web-TV programme (www.lostindeutschland.de) and blogs at www.lostindeutschland.blogspot.com and www.blog.young-germany.de

THE RETURN OF KEYNES

CHRISTOPHER JACKSON

The financial crisis brought many commentators to remark that Keynesianism has returned to the fold of modern macroeconomic policymaking. Fiscal stimulus packages in the UK and the US appear to herald a renewed belief in spending one's way out of recession, this more than thirty years since James Callaghan candidly expressed his disbelief in the efficacy of such measures at the 1976 Labour Party Conference, and more than twelve years since Gordon Brown himself at the same event was to advocate similar views:

"And I tell you we have learned from past mistakes. Just as you cannot spend your way out of recession, you cannot, in a global economy, simply spend your way through recovery either."
(Gordon Brown, Labour Party Conference, 29 September 1997)

The retreat from Keynesian demand management in the 1970s and 1980s was followed by a new paradigm for economic management where the levers of the economy were gifted to independent monetary policymakers, carefully tinkering with interest rates, keeping the economy to bands and targets of performance. But, as renowned biographer of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky, noted last year, 'John Maynard Keynes has been restored to life'. Though central banks were quick to cut interest rates, governments weighed in with large budget deficits, increased public spending and cuts in taxation of a distinctively Keynesian flavour. However, more than two years on from the collapse of Lehman Brothers with the economy experiencing the taste of positive economic growth again, the thoughts of politicians have turned to the recovery and what is next for the economy, and Keynes' rebirth is set to be a divisive one.

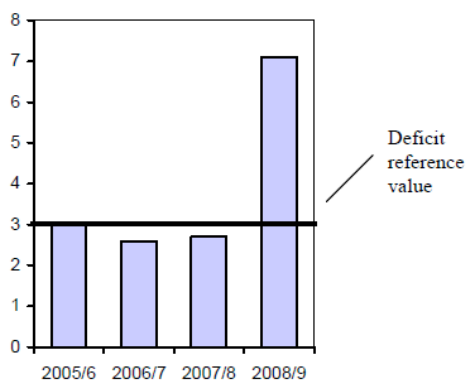
A debate now rages on both sides of the Atlantic as to the next course of action between those who advocate maintaining or even increasing current levels of public spending in the vein of a Keynesian stimulus and those who wish to budgetary regularity restored as soon as possible. The Conservative Party has found little room for Keynes, turning to "radical monetary activism" and "fiscal responsibility". They argue that rather than looking to Keynesian fiscal solutions – namely, greater public spending to stimulate demand – it is the interest rate that will be the UK's most powerful weapon in recovering from the recession. Given the massive growth in the size of the UK's deficit, George Osborne argued "lower interest rates are by far the most powerful tool we have to stimulate demand, prevent defaults, and help households and businesses to start paying down debt". It is argued that Britain cannot afford further fiscal stimuli to the economy because of the already large budget deficit, 7.1% of GDP for 2008/09; further debt would serve only to rattle investor confidence and raise interest rates. Therefore they have advocated reducing the budget deficit more quickly than their opponents with cuts in public-sector pay and jobs.

Return of Keynes

There is, however, very much still room for John Maynard Keynes in this recession and in the recovery. Though Keynes was an advocate of using monetary policy in a recession, it is, he argued, often not enough. The current Bank of England interest rate is 0.5%, so it is hard to see what more the interest rate mechanism can do to further stimulate a recovery. There lie a couple of key assumptions that lie beneath the anti-Keynesians' position that a larger deficit or slower deficit reduction will do more harm than good. First, that greater government borrowing will serve only to flood the market with government bonds, 'crowd out' private investment, lowering their price on these gilts and pushing up interest rates. This may be true, if the money supply in the economy does not change. Yet the Bank of England's programme of quantitative easing has pumped money into the market, buying up government bonds, keeping their price and actually reducing the interest rates on government bonds (Figure 2). As David Miles of the Monetary Policy Committee points out, the spread on UK government bonds has actually fallen relative to the Euro, which has not pursued a similar path of quantitative easing.

	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
General government deficit £bn	38.1	34.6	38.3	101.3
as a percentage of GDP	3.0	2.6	2.7	7.1
General government debt at				
nominal values £bn	531.5	574.1	613.9	796.9
as a percentage of GDP	41.8	42.6	43.3	55.5

General government net borrowing
as a percentage of GDP



General government gross debt
as a percentage of GDP

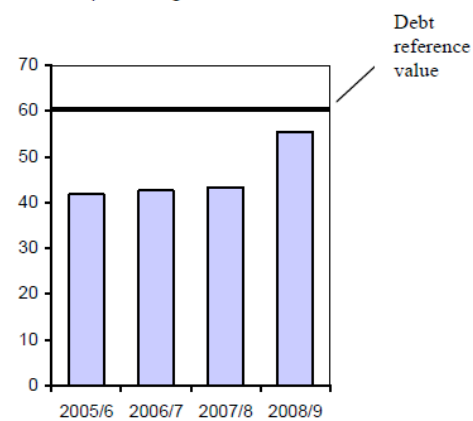


Figure 1

The reference value for 'excessive deficit' is 3% of GDP. The reference value 'excessive debt' is 60%.
Source: ONS, 'Government Debt and Deficit under the Maastricht Treaty', 30 September 2009

The second limitation to the anti-Keynesian point of view is that it overestimates the UK economy's stage of recovery. Though signs of recovery are present, the UK's position is tentative and economists are weary of falling back into recession if the plug on the stimuli to the economic is pulled too quickly. As No-

bel Prize winner Paul Krugman and ex-Monetary Policy Committee member David Blanchflower have warned us, we should be wary of calling the recession over before it is over, and have been arguing respectively for a second stimulus package in America and a continuation of public spending in the UK.

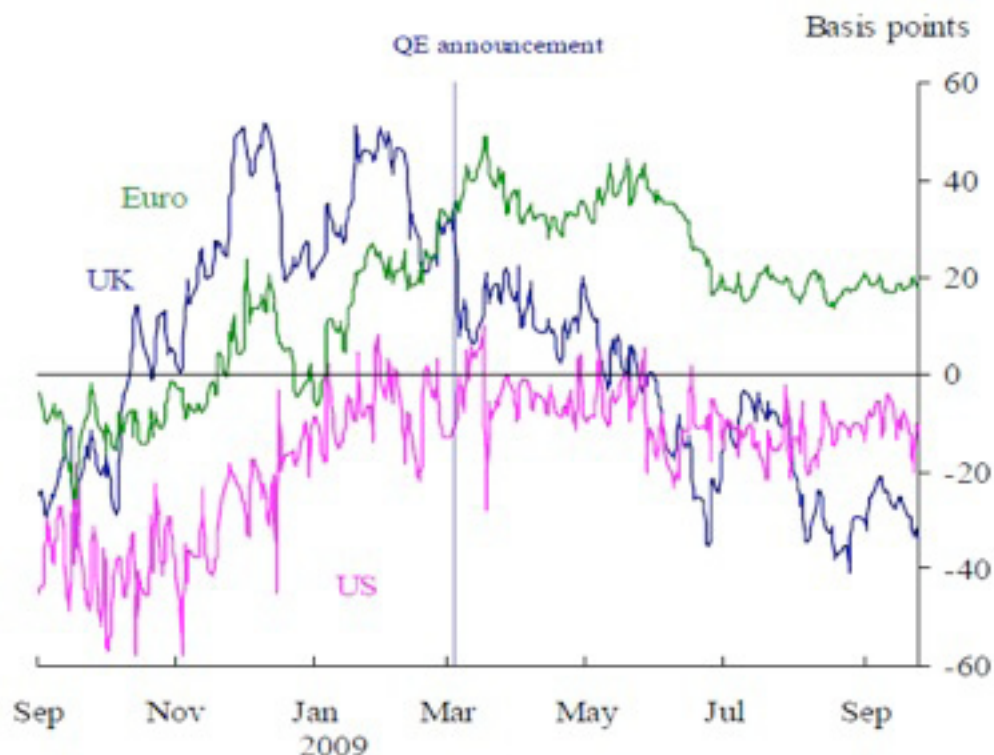


Figure Two

International Spot-Gilt-OIS Spreads (5 year maturities).

Source: Miles, 'Money, Banks and Quantitative Easing', 2009

One important respect in which this is true is the supply of credit to small and medium-sized businesses. In the UK, these companies rely heavily on banks loans as sources of credit, rather than on alternative sources of finance such as corporate bonds. As commercial banks are still rebuilding their balance sheets and averse to lending in the current market, the access of businesses to credit has been severely reduced in the recession and lending to businesses has yet to increase following quantitative easing. The thinness of the market for corporate bonds is reflected in the composition of the Bank of England's asset purchases under quantitative easing. Of the £190 billion spent on assets by the Bank as of 31st December 2009, only £0.429 billion was outstanding purchases on corporate bonds. Total bank lending to UK companies has continued to fall in 2009. Four-quarter growth in the stock of sterling loans to Private Non-Financial Companies was -3.4% in 2009 Q3, down from a recent peak of 18.5% in 2006 Q4. It appears that quantitative easing and lower interest rates have been, so far, ineffective at stimulating lending to businesses. As Adam Posen recently argued,

"...the relative limits in the UK on availability of non-bank financing for smaller companies may constrain emergence of a sustainable private-sector led recovery"

Return of Keynes

Corporate bond issuance and bank loans 2003 – 2009

B.1 Chart 1.A shows corporate bond issuance in 2009 in the UK and US. This growth partly follows the change in the relative price of bank versus bond finance (see chart 2.A in section 2).

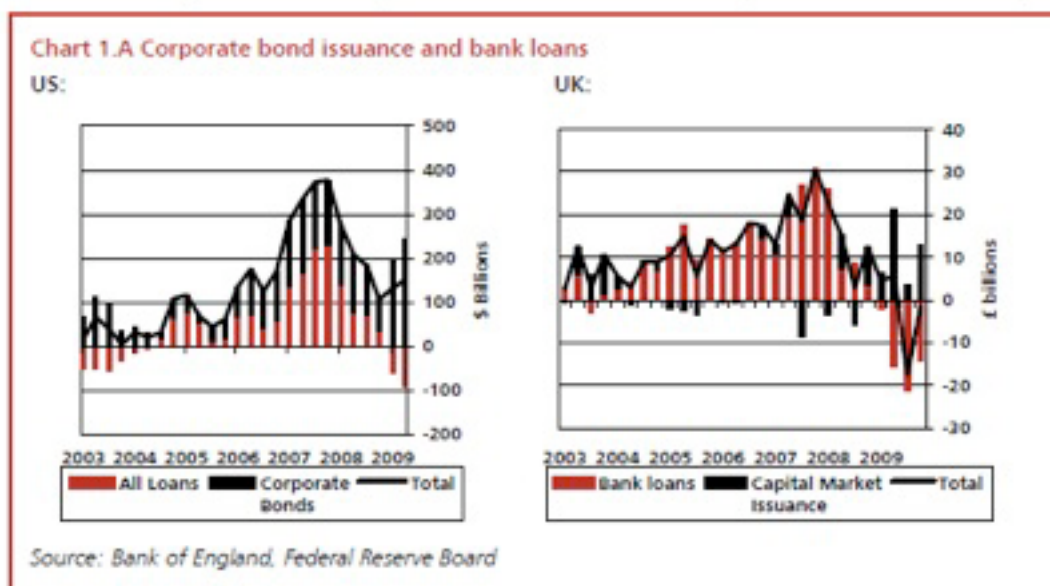


Figure 3

Source: HM Treasury, Discussion Paper on Non-Bank Lending, January 2010

Here we return to Keynes. The recovery will be tentative and weak so long as businesses are denied a healthy line of credit. Unless we can create conditions where businesses can grow and create new jobs, unemployment will be slow to come down from its current level of 7.8%. And it is unemployment where the recession pinches hardest. If the monetary channel of interest rates and quantitative easing are failing to provide this, we must turn to fiscal policy, as Gordon Brown argued in December:

“The fact is if your monetary policy is cutting interest rates, but there is an impaired mechanism that you have got to gradually be able to sort out, then governments have to use fiscal policy, and that has been seen in every country of the world.”

It is currently too dangerous to hand over the recovery to the private sector from the public sector, if we cannot be sure that the credit market is there to aid it. It is important that the government, and the government to come, do not cut public spending too soon in pursuit of deficit reduction. While the private sector recovers, the government must step in to provide investment and to maintain growth. One way in which the private sector may recover, as a recent Treasury Discussion Paper explores, is to expand the sources of non-bank credit to reduce the dependency of private investment on the state of commercial banks.

One of the most serious problems in dealing with the financial recession is the pervasiveness of uncertainty in the economy. When the sub-prime mortgage market collapsed in America, there was a great deal of uncertainty due to synthetic AAA rated assets, formed with risky loans vulnerable to macroeconomic shocks to the economy.

Investors were suddenly uncertain about the risks and value of the assets they had on their books. Uncertainty differs from risk in that the risk deals with known unknowns, whereas uncertainty is the world of unknown unknowns, and the current investment market contains a lot of uncertainty. Where there is uncertainty, investors are unwilling to move, and credit markets freeze. This was Keynes' objection to a purely monetary approach to fighting recessions – the Bank of England has supplied the economy with cheap money and credit, yet the economy is unwilling to begin lending again because of uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Therefore the solution, Keynes advises us, is for the government to spend. A strong fiscal response to the current crisis is required because the private sector is unable to sustain a recovery itself.

Though the Office of National of Statistics has reported that the UK is now officially out of a recession, the recovery is far from won. Keynes has returned to macroeconomic policymaking, but his ideas no longer dominate the political landscape as they first did all those decades ago. While Keynes' sceptics desire a swift reduction of the nation's budget deficit and reductions in public spending, this misunderstands the current state of the economy. This is not the time for savage public sector cuts. When the private and financial sectors of the economy are still finding their feet in the wake of the financial crisis, it is a risk to cut off the government spending that is maintaining jobs, investment and confidence.

Christopher Jackson is studying for an MPhil in Economics at University College.

NOW'S THE TIME FOR A TOBIN TAX

GEORGE IRVIN

Has Gordon Brown's support for a Tobin tax waned, or will he press home the idea in the near future? Alistair Darling's approach remains cautious. A forthcoming Treasury report is rumoured to suggest introducing a Financial Transactions Tax and an insurance levy on the banks, but it is being made contingent on the actions of other countries (ie, the USA) and there is no indication of its timing.

The government seems convinced that by continuing to steer a cautious economic course, Britain will return to business as usual in 3-4 years. But can mere caution, coupled with a temporary tax on greedy bankers and a neutral budget, prevent an outright Tory victory in 2010, still less restore our economic health?

The answer remains 'probably not.' Britain will not return to pre-2008 style growth anytime soon, perhaps not even for a generation. We've now fallen behind Germany, France, and Italy in GDP terms, and it's already being forecast that the UK will soon slip out of the top ten in the economic league tables altogether. Industrial output is falling despite a 25% effective devaluation. In the absence of growth and a large boost in tax receipts for the Exchequer, spending will be cut sooner or later, hastening our economic decline.

Anybody who thinks zero growth under present circumstances is a good thing should remember that fiscal stringency means no public investment in new technologies for energy generation, no public subsidies for developing fuel-efficient cars, for insulating houses, for installing double glazing and so on. Fiscal stringency means that Britain will not do the sort of things which Germany, The Netherlands and the Nordic countries have been doing for the past two decades, the Treasury argument being that 'we simply can't afford it.' However strongly you and I may disagree with this argument, the UK Treasury is a deeply conservative force at the heart of power.

Nevertheless, there is a way forward. A government determined to push through genuine tax reform could raise new billions for the sort of green investment that Britain so badly needs while at the same time helping to boost economic recovery. But why include a Tobin tax? The answer is, basically, because it's an enormous money spinner.

A recent Compass pamphlet listed a financial transactions tax (FTT) as one of the recommended measures. The Tobin tax is merely a special form of FTT: it's a currency transactions tax or CTT. Such a tax was first suggested in 1971 by the American Keynesian economist, James Tobin, and was designed to slow speculative currency dealing by traders---what Lord Turner recently termed 'socially useless' activity. The Bank of International Settlements (BIS) estimates that in 2007 the world's yearly currency transactions totalled \$800tr (that's fifteen times world GDP, or nearly a quadrillion dollars) of which 80% is purely speculative. The sterling trade alone is

worth £34tr---far less than dollar transactions but still a vast amount of money (sterling is the fourth most traded currency). A 0.1% tax on sterling transactions would raise £34bn per annum, or the equivalent of about 2.5% of UK GDP---and that's based on a tax rate of £1 per £1000, one-tenth the rate originally proposed by Tobin.

The usual argument against a Tobin tax is that all countries must agree to it if it is to work; ie, that if Britain alone imposed it, all sterling traders would move to the Caymans or Lichtenstein. There are two answers to this. First, Britain already has a form of FTT: the stamp duty on share dealings is 0.5% per trade---five times 0.1%---and share dealers have not fled the country. Secondly, even if the sterling trade migrated, this objection has been overtaken by technology. Sterling trades today take place on computer screens, and these can be monitored wherever they are physically located. Most important, for a currency trade to take place there must be an official settlement: unless the tax were paid, authorisation would be withheld and the trade could not take place. A City foreign exchange brokerage firm, INTL Global Currency, has already run successful trials of a CTT software program which does precisely this.

Another objection is that a Tobin tax alone would not achieve its objective of deterring risky economic activity. Again, there are at least two replies: first, one can experiment with variable rates for different types of trades. Secondly, a Tobin tax could be complemented by a new bankruptcy regime requiring unsecured creditors and other counterparties to be forcibly and swiftly converted into shareholders, until the failed institutions are adequately recapitalised.

In short, a Tobin tax on sterling, dollar, euro, yen or other currency transactions is perfectly feasible. Clearly, a CTT levied on all currencies would raise vast sums--according to a recent Austrian government study, a tax of just 0.05% would raise \$700bn per annum, enough to meet the Millennium Development Goals with ease. In the case of sterling, a CTT---combined with other tax reform---would cover the UK government's future structural budget deficit; ie, the average deficit over a business cycle, even assuming (as one must) that future growth will be sluggish and therefore the budget deficit deeper. Most important, it could pay for Green New Deal!

We need a Tobin tax. A temporary tax on bankers' bonuses is simply not enough. Why should ordinary Britons be made to pay for the financial sector's gambling debts? After all, currency speculation is just another form of gambling. Darling's tax on bankers' bonuses is a small step in the right direction, but we need far bolder measures. Let's make Britain a leader in promoting tax justice. If Labour has the courage to seize this opportunity, it could lay the basis for genuine economic sustainability.

George Irvin is a graduate of Lincoln College and a Professorial Research Fellow at SOAS, University of London. He co-wrote a Compass paper on tax reform, "In place of cuts" in 2009. This essay was originally published by Compass.

THE SCIENCE OF COPENHAGEN

KAIHSU TAI

In the last few months the media reported intensively on the Copenhagen summit on climate change, corresponding to the intense civil-society attention given to it over the whole of 2009. This briefing sets out (from the limited vantage point of its author) the science underlying the negotiations at COP15, and an assessment of its outcome. It concludes that despite the generally disappointing and despondent tone after the summit, there are a few signs of hope for the persistent campaigners.

The first half of December 2009 saw the Copenhagen summit on climate change. Officially, this was the 15th session of the Conference of Parties (COP15)¹ to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)², a process which started in 1992. An earlier UNFCCC attempt to coordinate the worldwide actions against climate change on an intergovernmental level was the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. COP15 aimed to reach agreement on what is to come after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Because its high profile attracted the attendance of many heads of governments, COP15 was often reported in the media as the Copenhagen summit.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)³ is a group of scientists set up by the governments to advise on the science of climate change. Reading the latest assessment report of 2007 from the IPCC, augmented with other trusted sources for updates, I understand that to limit the most dangerous effects of climate change (such as large sea-level rise and more-intense extreme weather events), the global average temperature rise needs to be limited to within 2°C from pre-industrial levels. This in turn requires controlling the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to within 350 parts per million carbon dioxide equivalent (at the moment it is a bit above 380 ppm). These numbers we cannot directly control. What we can control are the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. These we can reduce, mainly by cutting down the use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas), but also by other methods of mitigation, such as slowing down deforestation.

In the UNFCCC, the governments of the world, taking into account the world history of industrialization and differing levels of development, recognized that all countries have “common but differentiated responsibilities” in facing the challenge of climate change. From this, the expectation is for rich countries to cut emissions more drastically than poorer countries. Also, financial help would be available to help poor countries leapfrog over carbon-intensive modes of development. Finally, vulnerable countries already seeing effects of climate change (such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Bangladesh, now losing land to the rising sea) would have funding to adapt to the new situation.

1 <http://en.cop15.dk/>

2 <http://unfccc.int/>

3 <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

Most participants entered Copenhagen hoping for an ambitious, fair, and legally-binding agreement to come out of COP15. This never happened. The European Union offered to increase its emissions cut from 20 % to 30 % by 2020 from 1990 levels if a deal could be reached, but appeared to have held this card high up its sleeve. Perhaps the United States of America offered too many billions of dollars but too little a cut (only 4 % by 2020 on 1990 baseline; the numbers sounded bigger with baseline massaged). Perhaps vulnerable countries like the Maldives overplayed their hands by demanding that 1.5°C rather than 2°C be the target. China definitely drove a hard bargain. Denmark was not the best moderator, and excluded civil-society groups from the discussion halfway through the conference. But finger-pointing aside, the outcome was that there was no legally-binding deal. Instead there was a political agreement, the Copenhagen Accord; and the world is left to try again at COP16 in Mexico, November/December 2010.

What next? There is no deal at Copenhagen, so any emissions cuts will have to be unilateral for the moment. Appendix I of the Copenhagen Accord invites each nation to enter its emissions cut target for 2020. The deadline to fill out this form was 31 January 2010. During COP15, the Maldives and Costa Rica offered 100 % cuts: they aim to be zero-emissions countries by the end of the decade. Closer to home, on one (devolved) hand we have Scotland committing itself to a legally-binding 42 % cut by 2020⁴; on the other (supranational) hand, the European Union takes the absence of a global pact as an excuse to retreat to a feeble 20 % cut by 2020. The UK-wide Climate Change Act 2008 provides for a target of 80 % cut by 2050 in section 1(1); the interim target for 2020 is yet to be decided.

Since the end of the Copenhagen summit, I have written to climate and energy minister Ed Miliband, asking him to write down “40 % cut by 2020, with no overseas carbon offsets” next to Britain’s name, and to ask other EU countries to do the same. I have also written similarly to my MP, my Members of the European Parliament, and some peers in the House of Lords. I thought I was alone when presenter Stephen Sackur of BBC Radio 4’s *Listeners Look Ahead* dismissed my suggestion as politically unlikely.

I was wrong. A week later, Lord (Anthony) Giddens replied: “those of us concerned with climate change are working hard to influence the government in the direction you mention for the proposals they will enter for the end of January in the follow up to Copenhagen.” Another week thereafter, Stop Climate Chaos Coalition started a Twitter petition addressed to the Prime Minister with this same aim.⁵ Commitments now to ambitious unilateral cuts offer us the best hope for a legally-binding agreement in Mexico by the end of the year. Remember, this is about the survival of the human species. Thus we might keep hope alive.

Dr Kaihsu Tai is a member of Saint Cross College. He recently started studying European Law after a decade of research in Biochemisiry.

4 Section 2(1) *Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009*

5 <http://act.ly/1lw>

COPENHAGEN: AN ACTIVIST'S PERSPECTIVE

SOPHIE LEWIS

Climate is a class issue. Its sorry state is also a symptom of democracy's incipient crisis; a symptom of global sociological disjunctions and malaise. Yet in small pockets, people are living despite capitalism. With widening reverberations, they are also demonstrating the appeal of an anti-consumerist, more communitarian kind of society - not to mention the immediate and urgent necessity of it. Civil society is also testing what the boundaries of non-violence are for climate justice protest, within increasingly neoliberal/policed nation states.

Nothing has ever been more political, and less fitted to nonsense charitable 'Make Poverty History'-type approaches, than the climate crisis. This is the mistake the president of the Wadham JCR made in telling me my application for funding for the Oxford Climate Forum - an action planning and networking conference for, and led by, students - belonged in the 'Charities' committee meeting rather than the politically oriented main meeting. Can we get over the idea that environmental campaigning goes in the same category as donating to Cancer Research?

What follows are a few notes looking back at COP15, from an activist's perspective. The freezing streets of Copenhagen this December saw more people rally in the cause of "climate justice" than ever before. The high-profile alternative climate conference, "Klimaforum", run on a shoe-string, assembled speakers from developed and developing nations, agriculturalists, feminists, and a range of figures familiar to a Guardian-reading minority, such as Wangari Maathai, George Monbiot and Naomi Klein. Unlike the de facto neocolonialist format of COP15 itself, the Klimaforum model for proposing and agreeing upon methods for justice was participatory, inclusive (even of the inevitable corporate interests that had inveigled their way in) and - broadly speaking - fair.

An enormous number of people gathered in Copenhagen to militate against the false solutions represented by COP15. Quite a few hailed from the global south (La Via Campesina, for example), and there were modest ranks of those from the West who represented leftist thinktanks, trade unions, hubs of scholar-activism, and internationalist workers' movements. Then of course there were the predictable anarchist collectives, NGO employees, Climate Campers, etcetera: middle-class environmentalists from all over Europe, Canada, the States. The turn-out may have been dominated by the overprivileged, and our strategies may have failed to wash over the armed battalions opposing us, but our eco-politics were at an encouragingly advanced stage of enlightenment.

It seemed nobody was persuaded by the fluorescent green, vacuous brand called 'Hopenhagen', sponsored by Coca Cola, whose meaningless displays were plastered all over Copenhagen's main square. Very few gave time or breath to carbon-trading

apologists, techno-fixers, or rhetoric of energy efficiency that ignores the problem of growth. Our chosen enemy wasn't carbon, it was capitalism. The fifteenth global Conference of Parties may have drawn us together, but a majority was uninterested, right from the outset, in its monumentally pathetic doings. You never trust a COP.

On Wednesday December 16th the Reclaim Power! demonstration was due to hit the streets surrounding the Bella Centre (where the COP15 was being held). The flagship event of the Climate Justice Action calendar, it was towards this that the majority of British activists who had travelled as part of Climate Camp were working over the preceding days. Each day had seen a generous handful of marches and direct actions – the spacious, white-capped capital was beginning to feel like a protest theme park. However, the previous day, in the Freetown Christiania, some big figures had been holding an evening of discussion combined with a pre-action party, until a violent raid by the police had chastened, terrified and dispirited swathes of people.

The Reclaim Power! plan involved a mainstream blue bloc advancing to the moated/fenced/policed Bella Centre perimeter, a mobile green bloc making a different route, a few autonomous groups creatively assailing the contours on their own, and a bicycle bloc composed of the recycled, customised 'machines of resistance' (mainly tall bikes, doubled bikes, bikes bearing useful tools and fence-cutting equipment...) which DIY type activists had welded for themselves in a cooperative community centre in the outskirts of Copenhagen.

Yet very little of our laborious enterprise came to fruition. Until we have training and organisation superior to the riot police's, we are doomed to be a malleable mob, bound not so much by our own codex of non-violence as by our depressing inability to act tactically in large numbers.

We had wanted to do was hold a people's summit on UN territory. Instead, we held a people's summit on the road, and our talks suggested that water- and food-sovereignty are the people's priorities. Meanwhile, within the conference, nearly a thousand delegates who tried to walk out in solidarity with the external Reclaim Power! action were brutally kept back. African delegates found their numbers curtailed when they staged a stamping, clapping, dancing show of objection to the Annex 1 countries' self-serving separatist hypocrisies (evidenced most crudely in the leak of the 'Danish text,' the proposal to give rich nations power over the results of any agreement.). Then again, environmentalist campaigners Nnimo Basse and José Bové were just two of the scores of 'non-governmental' delegates who, despite having standard accreditation as well as the secondary passes which were suddenly pre-requisite, were never admitted in the first place.

So the exclusion of the civil society sector from the UN negotiations, in favour of the fossil fuel lobbyists and carbon financiers, was coupled with the systematic and undemocratic deployment of 'special' police powers to suppress dissent. The remarks that follow are perhaps unsurprising, but it is still worth being clear about them, and reflecting upon what they mean. Thousands of peacefully protesting people

Copenhagen Activism

were 'pre-emptively arrested'. We were stacked in steel box-cages (a purpose-built arrest facility was dubbed by the arresting officers 'mini Guantanamo') without access to lavatories, food or water for hours on end. We were treated like terrorists, whether we looked like 'black bloc' anarchists or like placard-wavers from Oxfam.

I was one of the 4,000 or so who failed to get inside the UN territory, and we were brutally rammed into a nearby road by a line of armoured cars where we suffered the beatings and pepper-sprays of an army of Danish 'POLITI'. My right thigh (where the batons got me worst) still looked like a decomposing plum three weeks after the event. Incidentally, it proved to be a nice little tactic to flash it for the benefit of any disbelieving liberal, over Christmas, who would not believe 'that the UN would hit a woman if she was doing nothing wrong'.

Then again, of course, I was doing something wrong. We "the people" (hem hem) were mobilising en masse around an international summit even more important than Seattle, in order to demonstrate a preferable alternative. This took place within the context of pre-existing instability. Traditional market logic was already off-balance. Events had proved that, excepting cancer, things in nature don't grow indefinitely, and it's a bad idea for anything, including markets, to do so. We looked like the coming insurrection, unavoidable, persuasive, and right. The sound of ideologies clashing could be heard behind the thump of steel on flesh, under the falling snow of Copenhagen. 20,000 pilgrim-campaigners or so in the city that week had created a dangerous and subversive culture of critique, questioning not only the effectiveness of 'business solutions' to climate change, but the very principle on which they are founded.

One magazine among many in the activist utopia that Copenhagen became for the week, called 'Perspectives', circulated radical viewpoints amongst us. It was widely understood amongst the uninvited delegates to Denmark, that it is our prerogative to go beyond the abstractions of anti-capitalism, towards concrete sites of strain and tension where the system's thorough-going weaknesses can be exposed. As the anonymous editors ("an invisible working group in Annex 1") put it: "This demands us generalising our resistance ... specifically amongst people in locations where these forces are easily visible. This means less Bishopsgate and more Kent, Mainshill, the Isle of Wight, and Calais." What are you waiting for?

Sophie Lewis is an English finalist at Wadham College.

Mainshill solidarity camp <http://coalactionscotland.noflag.org.uk/>

Calais Migrant Solidarity <http://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/>

Save Vestas <http://savevestas.wordpress.com/>

Climate Camp <http://climatecamp.org.uk>

REVIEW: *FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE*

BY SLAVOJ ZIZEK

MATTHEW KENNEDY

Hegel's less famous dictum about history ran something like 'history teaches us that no one ever learned anything from history.' History it would seem is proving him right, as the bankers cram wadges of cash into holdalls. Capitalism, it would seem, is alive and well. Until the nex time...

Zizek's book is nothing if not timely. The title refers to the two events which bookend the first decade of the 21st century: the attacks on the twin-towers on September 11 2001 and 'the financial meltdown' of 2008 and is of course a reference to Marx's opening statement in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Loius Bonaparte. Much ink was spilled over the 'financial crisis', weeks went by where the only words one would see at the newspaper stand were 'credit' 'crunch' and 'crisis'. Doubtless the severity of the event was magnified immesurably by the sheer media hysteria. The bankers didn't know what was going on, the governments didn't know what was going and the leader writers certainly didn't know what was going on. In the first part of his newest book Zizek offers the most perspicuous anaylsis of what happened that I have read. Granted it's an anti-capitalist analysis but Zizek says as much himself. The axes are in full view. The opening salvo equates the \$700bn which the American government threw a Wall Street as the economic equivalent of a genuflexion and urges us to 'control our fury and transform it into an icy determination to think – to think things through in a really radical way, and to ask what kind of society it is that renders such blackmail [the financial bailout] possible.' Before moving to a consideration of some answers to this question Zizek offers a surprising caveat: 'any naïve Leftist expectation that the current financial and economic crisis opens up a space for the radical Left is thus without doubt dangerously short-sighted.' 'The primary immediate effect of the crisis', he writes, 'will not be the rise of a radical emancipatory politics but rather the rise of racist populism, further wars, increased poverty... and greater divisions between the rich and poor in societies'. This is no Utopia.

The following analysis of the 'ideology' of advanced capitalism acknowledges early on its debts to Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine. 'What if,' he asks, 'the particular malfunctionings of capitalism enumerated by Caputo are not merely accidental disturbances but rather are structurally necessary?' If nothing else the idea advanced that the financial crisis was a necessary crisis of capitalism, a regenerative crisis (if such a thing could exist) helps to explain why we have seen a return to the status quo ante so quickly and so shamelessly. The crisis is explained away, bad decisions in far away places caused it, it is nothing to do with Capitalism per se. This tendency to envelop all criticism into the Capitalist 'ideology' was something picked

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up by Marcuse in the late 1960s. Freedom of association, speech and conscience were originally critical ideas but have been institutionalised by capitalism so that they become expressions of capitalist 'values'. It appropriates them for its own.

This is so because of the profoundly ideological nature of Capitalism's 'non-ideological' rhetoric. Capitalism 'needs no ideological justification because its success is itself sufficient justification.' And its failure is, paradoxically, proof that it is 'working' correctly. Capitalism, we are told, 'is the first socio-economic order which de-totalises meaning'. Zizek provides us with a critical evaluation of the same 'hegemony' which Fukuyama described exactly ten years previously. Zizek's earlier warning about the consequences of the financial crisis are almost verbatim reminiscent of Derrida's critique of Fukuyama's thesis, that 'never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity.'

The non-ideological ideological hegemony of capitalism is born out by present events. There was never really any question that RBS would be allowed to go to the wall, nor any of the other banks. Now it is unquestionable that those who were the proximate cause of the financial crisis (the banking sector professionals) should be expected to repay the money they were loaned before taking home their bonuses as rewards for the 'risks' they take. With the exception of apoplectic newspaper editorials nothing is done, we simply roll over. The only notable instance of organised mass action ended in the still yet unexplained death of one man at the hands of the metropolitan police.

Quo vadis then? Zizek tell us that 'the great defining problem of Western Marxism was the lack of a revolutionary subject or agent.' The problem still persists if we continued to conceive of the revolutionary subject as Marx's proletariat: 'we need a more radical notion of the proletarian subject, a subject reduced to the evanescent point of the Cartesian cogito.' We are the revolutionary subject because we are all proletarian now. We have all been alienated from ourselves by the hegemony of capitalism. This alienation finds its ultimate expression in capitalism's appropriation of culture, what Adorno called the Culture Industry. Thus, as Adorno describes in his essay on Free Time, even our free time is conceived of in terms of 'efficiency' and 'productivity' the Capitalist ethos has infected our entire existence and 'relations between things' have replaced 'relations between people.' However, in order to realise that we are the revolutionary agent we must recognise first our total subjugation. We must recognise that we are 'formally free' that is that we should be free, that we have the potential to be free in order to realise that we are not free. Then we can overcome our 'fetters' and overthrow the Capitalist order.

Like Marx before him in his description of the mobilisation of proletariat we are never told how this actually happens. It is easy to confuse why and how. By how I mean the actual mechanism, the organisational and institutional structure by which such mass action could be facilitated. Zizek too fails to provide this information. We are told that it will not come from theories and he proves his point admirably. The absence of a well-defined structural mechanism for the fulfilment

of these prophecies hampers the effectiveness of Zizek's vision about the return of Communism in a non-soviet orientation. Perhaps this is an oversight (doubtful) or perhaps it is the implicit admission of two things: a) 'the people' don't want Communism. They might if they could recognise that they were 'formally free' but this remains unlikely. And b) the revolutionary action to be effective almost always requires two things: force and an 'elite' organisational structure.

Zizek's book is timely and necessary. His no-holds-barred analysis of the financial meltdown of 2008 and its place within the ideology of Capitalism is as refreshing as it is compelling. Whilst his presentation of Communism as the obvious alternative is appealing in a romantic sort of way, his failure (as those before him) to detail how this could take place diminishes the book as a manifesto for an alternative organisation of human society. The need for such a thing is still as acute and Zizek's attempt is strident and valiant. For the time being perhaps the Left has to be resigned, in Beckett's words, to 'Fail. Fail again. Fail better.'

'First as Tragedy, then as Farce' was published in 2009 by Verso.

Matthew Kennedy is a History Finalist at St. Hugh's and the Editor of The Oxford Forum and Political Officer of Compass Oxford

REVIEW: *THE HABIT OF ART* BY ALAN BENNETT

ROBERTA KLIMT

Alan Bennett's newest play is a masterclass in metatheatricality. *The Habit of Art* is set in the National Theatre during rehearsals for a play by an unnamed writer, whose theme is an imagined late-in-life meeting between erstwhile friends Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden. The play, called *Caliban's Day* in deferent reference to Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, is presented to us complete with long-suffering producer, egotistical writer, and actors who tend to nod off mid-scene, gripe about their role, even spurn rehearsal altogether because they are acting in a Chekhov *matinée* elsewhere. Humphrey Carpenter, biographer of both Britten and Auden, is also a character in *Caliban's Day*: the action's frame narrator. This is nicely mimetic of Carpenter's real-life relation to Britten and Auden, but as with much else that is good about *Caliban's Day* (or is it *The Habit of Art*?), we scarcely have time to notice and admire it before somebody onstage does something to break the spell.

While this level of convolution could seem a Pirandellian flourish if it came from another writer, coming from Bennett it appears as if the river of our playwright's persona had burst its dam rather. The major feature of *The Habit of Art* is a kamikaze self-consciousness: the play uses its reflexivity to pre-empt and rebuff just about any audience criticism. If a speech is mawkish, you can bet one of the characters will say so; if something happens that is ludicrously improbable, such as a conversation between Britten's musical notes and the words of Auden's poems, the pragmatic producer will say it before you can whisper it to your neighbour. Such forward planning is impressive, to be sure, but it also gets a little annoying: there is such tricksiness in Bennett's being able to cock a snook, along with his audience, at some of his own ideas, just by virtue of having put them in the mouth of someone else.

To an extent, of course, such double-dealing is an authorial privilege. It is undoubtedly the case that most writers ventriloquise some of their thoughts anyway, and are only less forthright about it than Bennett has been. But there is something unremitting, even aggressive, in the way Bennett brings his play-within-a-play about. Audience members' constant awareness of their status as patrons of the National Theatre; frequent reminders of the essential falsity of a situation in which men and women are paid to impersonate other men and women (real or fictional); heavy-handedly bivalent allusions to the habit, the habit, of art; reference to the morality or otherwise of writing about the real lives of famous artists – all this, the play tends to fling at us unprocessed. To quote Morrissey (in documentary praise of whom Bennett has more than once been a talking head), *The Habit of Art* shows us a world in which 'reason and freedom's a waste – / It's a lot like life.' Frustratingly like life, in fact.

In a recent essay Bennett asserted that, not having been 'seriously incommoded' by censorship himself (it was abolished in 1968, the year of his first production), he has also felt the lack of it as a structural principle:

'With censorship there was a line between what one could and couldn't say, and the nearer one got to this line the greater the tension... After censorship went, the dramatist had to manufacture tension of his or her own.'

(London Review of Books, 5 November 2009)

It is probably this statement which sheds best light on Bennett's decision to write *The Habit of Art* as he wrote it. The 'tension' which would have been present had the story only been about an ageing Auden, a brittle Britten, perhaps did not present the playwright with enough that was new: pederasty, he's treated; marginalised young boys too; the problems of ageing and imminent obsolescence have riddled his plays for years. In *The Habit of Art* all these are still here: but they are joined by the specific and metatextual battle of the author against his and everyone else's comfortable, habitual sense of what literature can do. It could be argued that this tension is always present in art, and that Bennett does not so much manufacture as he does uncover it, but the problem is more complex than that.

In a ten-minute monologue for BBC 4, Bennett remarked that when you are a writer, no experience is completely pure: there is always the 'little monkey on your shoulder', thinking about how what you are going through, however lacerating, is going to look when it has been written down. It is important that the text Bennett referenced in order to make this point was *Patrimony*, Philip Roth's non-fiction memoir of his father's decline and demise. Leaving aside the question of how wise it is of Bennett to take for his model an author whose postmodern brilliance is matched only by his track record as a cardinal exploiter of the everyday, it does seem that this seventy-five-year-old's 'late style' (a term Bennett gently mocks in that piece for the LRB) is characterised by a Rothian awareness of the intrinsic disingenuousness of art. But Bennett's writing does something else: it demonstrates even while problematising the fact that the human imagination, if it wants something badly enough, can stand a great deal of evidence impeding that wish.

In *The Habit of Art*, this effect is not achieved by salacious revelations regarding either Auden or Britten's private life – the public has long been able to leave that sort of disbelief suspended somewhere between the postal addresses of Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin. Rather, Bennett steers us tremulously close to the kind of play *The Habit of Art* might have been, but makes us feel that if he had written that play, it would have been a cop-out. And yet, just as Larkin enacts a bravura hypocrisy in his poetry, formally responding to but thematically thumbing his nose at the hope that literature will 'solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order', so does Bennett know that the theatrical conventions he sends up are also those that have held him and his playgoers in place for forty years and more. Uncomfortably though *The Habit of Art* might wear its own theatricality, the play is also shot through with one certitude: neither Auden nor Britten, nor Bennett himself, would be anywhere at all if they were to shrug the habit off.

The Habit of Art is on at the National Theatre until February 1st and will tour the UK this autumn.

Roberta Klimt is a graduate of Worcester College (English 2009).

TODAY'S LOST GENERATION – “ALL DOLED UP”

NOEL HATCH

Despite our diversity, it is worth remembering that today's youth are all one generation. We are all in it together, and even if the crisis directly affects only some now, it will in the future affect our whole. It started on the news with statistics and graphs; it hit the press with editorials about queues at the job centre and testimonies of bright graduates sacked and struggling; and if we haven't been made redundant ourselves, then we may well know someone who has. We may be “all skilled up”, but that is not helping in today's job market. Despite the efforts of marketing gurus to turn the “lost generation” into a brand, being unemployed is a personal wound, and a national scar.

This is not the first generation to have faced shocks or setbacks. Yet it is a generation taught that it lives in a ‘no risk’ society. Perhaps this is why we find it more difficult to cope with these shocks and bounce back. Those youngsters recently queuing to splash out in the sales are now lining up in dole queue. It is why we need support that is both practical - fairer wages to pay back our debt and pay for the rent - and psychological - more time to build our skills and our relationships with others.

With its Backing Young Britain campaign, the government is calling on businesses and other organisations to commit to supporting young people. It has also promised a job guarantee for young people out of work for more than six months. Compass Youth supports this and calls for the guarantee to be continued, but although the offer of 100,000 jobs should be supported, it will still leave nine in every ten unemployed young people in the dole queue.

Another problem is that young people are asked to do first-class work but get treated like second-class workers. They get treated like kids, with pocket money wages, so end up paying the poverty premium. They are always last to join and first to leave. They are cheaper and easier to fire. On youth unemployment, the government is still performing what S. Hall calls a “double shuffle”¹ – subsidising new jobs with one hand whilst with the other hand incentivising employers to offer precarious work (for example internships). It is subsidising the market to remain a master, not a servant. The government is failing to address these, providing little protection against the exploitation faced by young people, such as those in internships or work experience, often asked to work above and beyond what is legally required of them in return for pay that undercuts the legal minimum wage.

That is why we need a minimum wage for all young people contracted for public sector work, including those on apprenticeships, internships and other work placements.

Government policy also fails to address the discrimination faced by young people in government schemes, where the employer is not bound to offer the train-

1 S. Hall, ‘New Labour’s Double Shuffle’, *Soundings Issue 24, Autumn 2003*

ing or benefits it offers its staff and, notably, is not bound to offer employees the opportunity to turn temporary contracts into permanent employment. That is why all young people on government-supported schemes should be granted the same benefits – including training and childcare - as those in the same workplace.

Most importantly, the government fails to address an inherent workplace culture in which it is acceptable to recruit young people simply because they are cheaper and easier to fire. This must stop. That is why Compass Youth is organising a listening campaign on youth unemployment, asking young people across the country some fundamental questions: How would you feel if you were out of work? How would you spend your time? What ideas do you want us to campaign on to tackle this?

We urge everyone to get involved – visit the campaign at www.alldoledup.org

Noel Hatch is the National Chair of Compass Youth. Further information on Compass Youth and its campaigns can be found at www.compassyouth.org and www.twitter.com/compassyouth

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within Oxford University.

compassoxford@googlemail.com
compassoxford.wordpress.com
compassoxford.wordpress.com/olr