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The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64

Old Labour, New Britain?

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General Editor's Preface

Consumption has always occupied an awkward place within the ideology of the British Left. Arguably, it ought to have been able to secure some kind of pride of place, stemming not least from the Rochdale pioneers of 1844 and the cooperative societies they gave rise to, which by the early twentieth century had come to occupy a key place in the domestic economy of the working classes. It could even feature prominently in left-wing programmes such as the ILP's 1926 *Socialism in our Time*, which drew attention, in a proto-Keynesian manner, to the problem of under-consumption. Yet, as Lawrence Black points out here, the Left were to be much discomforted by the rise of consumer society in the 1950s. Cooperative consumption to deal with insufficiency, or the stimulation of consumption to mop up unemployment, were all very well. But the Left had never had to think, until this point, too deeply about consumption in and of itself, whether it was a public good, or how it fitted in with visions of a more just society. Traditional visions of the latter had seen socialism as a means somehow of distributing social goods more equitably. Socialism was also an ethical ideal, requiring a better society, if not better human beings, to be realized. Quite how that fitted with consumer choices and desires, however, had never been effectively addressed, let alone explicated.

The resulting perplexity is effectively delineated in this, the first full-length study of the Left's attempts to come to terms with these difficulties. In the process, as Black demonstrates, the Left – whether Communist or within the Labour Party – added to its own problems through its own self-image, and its view of the people it sought to represent. A powerful myth of the forward march of Labour contributed to considerable cognitive dissonance as it began to dawn that the forward march had halted. Like Thatcherites in the 1990s, convinced of the essential popularity of their cause, rather than its contingent electoral success in the particular circumstances of the 1980s, many on the Left resisted all attempts to unveil to them the mind of the electorate. Instead, in a piece of cod-Gramscism, they found that the only way they could explain the failure of the people's party to prove the people's favourite was to resort to lamenting the ways in which the Tories had duped the voters with their false white goods paradise. Thus

Macmillan's banal observation in 1957 that 'Most of our people have never had it so good' was played up as a paean to consumerism, rather than as the warning against inflation which was at the forefront of his concerns both in that speech and throughout that year. Macmillan, as a politician, is perhaps fair game for this kind of distortion. However, behind it, as Black shows, was a rather patronizing attitude to the electorate. Contemporary studies showed that the voters did not necessarily switch parties as they changed washing powders, or unceremoniously dump one for the other when they acquired a new television. Nevertheless, Black argues, Labour anxieties on this score, and the way in which they were articulated, may have helped to put off potential supporters.

To be fair, however, a view that there existed a solid working-class Labour vote which was in danger of bleeding away through embourgeoisement was by no means confined to activists on the left. More sophisticated variants of this view continued to be a dominant theme within British psephology during the Thatcher decade. Perhaps it is doomed to reappear whenever the Conservatives enjoy a lengthy spell in power? Evidence that voters could choose to acquire washing machines but cling to their socialist faith tended to bounce off such adamant convictions. Black argues that Wilson's electoral successes did not so much show that he had come to terms with this evidence, but skirted round it through promising not white goods but 'white heat'. The corporatist nature of many of Wilson's policy prescriptions would seem to support this view. It is Tony Blair, in discovering *Mondeo man* in the aftermath of Labour's disappointment in 1992, who is supposed to have uncovered the elixir for resolving this problem. Aspirational voters were not to be treated with 1950s-style disdain. Instead of waiting for the state to deliver socialism, electors were now to be the recipients of targetted services and wealth redistribution. The rhetoric was different, and continually repackaged, even if the content bore a greater resemblance to the past. In the process, however, socialism (or whatever it is Blair thinks he has been elected to deliver) really does become 'whatever a Labour government does', as Morrison famously put it, rather than an ethical ideal for which the left was simply, as late as the 1950s, as Black shows, a somewhat flawed vehicle. And if that government fails to deliver, the consumer as voter can always elect someone else.

Peter Catterall
London, January 2002

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Abbreviations

AIC	Advertising Inquiry Council
ASA	Advertising Standards Authority
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science, LSE
BJL	Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull
BMRB	British Market Research Bureau
CA	Consumers' Association
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPV	Colman, Prentis and Varley
ITA	Independent Television Authority
ITV	Independent Television
LLOY	Labour League of Youth
LPACR	Labour Party Annual Conference Report
MML	Marx Memorial Library, London
MRC	Modern Records Centre, Warwick University
NEC	National Executive Committee (Labour Party)
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History, Manchester
NSA	National Sound Archive, British Library
THMOA	Tom Harrisson Mass Observation Archive, Sussex University
TUC	Trades Union Congress
YCL	Young Communist League
YS	Young Socialists (Labour Party)