

## BOOK REVIEW

MURPHY, COLM. *Futures of Socialism*. “Modernisation”, the Labour Party and the British Left, 1983–1997. [Modern British Histories.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2023. x, 316 pp. Ill. £85.00. (Paper: £24.99; E-book: \$32.99.)

Much of the research about the British Labour Party over recent years has been framed in a rather reductive fashion. Frequently, scholars have charted a distinct rupture whereby “Old Labour” gave way to its new variant, under Tony Blair’s leadership. Manifestly, there have been differences of interpretation concerning the character of New Labour. Critics have lined up to identify it as either Thatcherite or neoliberal (most likely an amalgam of the two); supporters, most obviously the party’s Blairite leadership, have asserted that New Labour offered a modernized social democracy that broke with years of decline, stagnation, and neglect. Of course, debates about British Labour have been nuanced and complicated (I participated in some of them). There were differences, for example, over the timing of the changes undergone by the party. But critics and supporters alike appeared to agree that, at some point, there had been a far-reaching break in Labour’s alignment.

In *Futures of Socialism*, Colm Murphy offers a profound and persuasive challenge to such historiography. In a sense, he is not so much taking sides in these discussions, as challenging the basis on which they take place. Pitched very much at the level of ideational argument within and around Labour, his focus is on the discourses surrounding the use of modernization as a concept to guide and underpin social democratic strategy. The resulting volume, based on an impressive range of archival material, is an extraordinary and original scholarly achievement, one that is ambitious in its scope and in its detail. Not only has Murphy made excellent use of well-established sources (take the Labour Party archives in Manchester, or the Kinnock papers in Cambridge), but he has dug productively into other collections (for example, the Bernie Grant papers at the Bishopsgate Institute and the Charter 88 archive at the University of Essex). The result is rewarding and compelling, if at times a shade dense: his text bristles with an uncommon depth in its source material. (I make this point partly because some scholars appear reluctant to get their hands “inky” in the labyrinthine archives of the labour movement, preferring to rely on textual assertion alone to mark the apparent validity of any claims they make.)

Examining debates within Labour politics during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Murphy demonstrates the centrality of modernization as a concept across the groupings within the party. There never was a Blairite monopoly of the term: far from it, the label was deployed with considerable variation as a central aspect of different discourses at varied times. It was, he suggests, at the heart of Stuart Holland’s Alternative Economic Strategy as well as a core part of the Greater London Council’s experiment

with local socialism under Ken Livingstone's leadership. More than that, progressive modernity went way beyond the debates around economic strategy: it was fundamental both to Labour's embrace of feminism and to the adoption of mainstreaming in its policy commitments. It was central, too, to some of the arguments about constitutional reform going into the 1990s. The embrace of such an outlook was neither unproblematic nor certain: Murphy looks at the arguments over black sections within Labour during this period and concludes that modernization was largely absent from such debates. Through these discussions, Murphy offers an account of Labour politics that is more pluralized, less polarized (whilst being contested), and more contingent than some existing scholars have concluded to be the case. Above all, Murphy maps out a powerful corrective to those who have claimed that Labour politics in this period can be characterized as little more than a rudimentary neoliberalism.

There are drawbacks to the ambition and breadth of Murphy's account. Covering such a range of material within a manageable length text comes at some cost. Readers may find the structure of the book rather disjointed: the chapters on economic policy come at the beginning and end of the volume, punctuated by those dealing with identity politics and the constitution. Some may quibble in places with the empirical focus that he offers. Whilst *Futures of Socialism* acknowledges the centrality of party modernization, there is no sustained account here of the organizational changes that Labour underwent. Elsewhere in the volume, there is an engaging account of industrial democracy (and its relation to modernity). But Murphy does not discuss the Capital Sharing study group of the early 1970s, whose proposals for employee share ownership were widely criticized on the left (they would damage support for public ownership, prove divisive, and legitimate profit as a return to those with assets). Murphy offers relatively little attention to inflation (though he does touch on the subject). Labour's struggle over the issue offers powerful support to his account. In February 1979, as its pay policy fell apart under sustained challenges (industrial disputes), James Callaghan's Labour Government reached a "St. Valentine's Day" pact with the TUC. A quasi-corporatist proposal, it called for an agreed assessment each year concerning the state of the economy between government, trade unions, and employers. Remarkably, the proposal then, more or less, made its way through the next eighteen years of Labour policy-making in opposition, usually called the National Economic Assessment. In 1981, it underpinned Peter Shore's Programme for Recovery; in the early 1990s, it popped up again when Labour endorsed the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. In office after 1997, the idea of a state of the nation debate persisted as Gordon Brown introduced the Pre-Budget Report as a means of promoting wider debate over economic issues.

The causal aspect of Murphy's account is rather downplayed. Pitched very much at the level of ideas, to be sure, he offers some causal analysis. But at times such appraisal is understated. What was driving Labour's orientation to modernization during these years? How sustained was it? Regarding constitutional matters, how far did Labour really break with the Westminster model? Murphy touches on, but only briefly, those scholars who have emphasized Labour's commitment to the past and the extent of the party's idealized attachment to it. Most obviously, did a nostalgic imperative damage its dedication to modernity? In similar vein, Labour's insular orientation, at times bordering on xenophobia, may have extended a profound obstacle to the party's progressive outlook. Murphy acknowledges Tony Benn's historicist nationalism, but I am not sure

he captures either the extent or the impact of such an outlook across the party. Take Peter Shore in 1983, as Labour's shadow chancellor, telling an interviewer: "There aren't any models. I mean you make your own future." He continued, "I have no models [...]. We have to make our own form of democratic socialism; of that, I'm sure."

Labour's turn to Europe – in terms of the detail of economic policy during the 1970s and in terms of a more general outlook during the 1980s – is, I think, fundamental in this regard. In particular, the 1980s brought together an unusual set of circumstances to the extent that the most significant groupings with the party found their existing strategies to be deeply problematic – they were literally redundant. The economic crisis of the 1970s had utterly derailed Anthony Crosland's revisionist programme of Keynesian social democracy; the electoral debacle of 1983, alongside rapid and profound deindustrialization (discussed by Murphy) had wrecked, effectively, the core propositions of Stuart Holland's Alternative Economic Strategy. It was in such circumstances, under Neil Kinnock's leadership and guided by his economic adviser, John Eatwell, that the party looked, pretty much for the first time in its history, to the practices and arrangements of European social democrats. Given the vacuum at home, the turn was unsurprising. Eatwell's version of the National Economic Assessment (the only item I ever saw in the Kinnock papers where copies were counted out and counted back in at each meeting) owed much to continental arrangements.

The points that I have raised here do not, I believe, detract from Murphy's account. Rather, they are part of the debate about Labour's development. Meticulously constructed, carefully argued, and determined in its articulation, *Futures of Labour* will become an essential part of those academic discussions. It sets a standard that scholars will struggle to match. In some ways, Murphy's contribution is even more far-reaching. In his emphasis on networks, intellectuals, and thinktanks alongside the formal institutions of Labour, he offers us a much wider conception of what a political party is than that found in many existing approaches. Aspects of the debate about Labour politics during this era are only just starting.

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