

Review of *Against the Third Way* by Alex Callinicos (London: Polity Press, 2001)

The first landslide election victory of Tony Blair's Labour Party in Britain back in 1997 was widely and warmly welcomed. The party had remodelled itself into an election-winning machine after years in the political wilderness. Furthermore, 'New Labour' also seemed to offer hope of a fresh start, a forward-looking politics that broke free from the seemingly sterile debates between, on the one hand, worshippers of the 'free market' and a 'grab-all-you-can' individualism, and, on the other, adherents of 'old-fashioned' socialism, with its unreconstructed faith in widespread state intervention, the traditional welfare state and, if necessary, nationalisation of selected industries. Parties elsewhere were quick to ape the model of 'New Labour'. These clones took power in countries such as Germany with Gerhard Schröder's Social Democrats driving out the Christian Democrats. That said, 'Blairism' had learned a great deal from America and the strategy of Bill Clinton's Democrats. Accordingly, the 'Blairites' strove to tailor New Labour's policies and presentation of those policies to suit what opinion pollsters told them about public aspirations, especially those of floating voters in the hallowed middle ground of politics. This politics of steering between the two 'old ways' was soon christened the 'Third Way'. It had its intellectual prophets too, most notably the British sociologist Anthony Giddens.

Despite a general contempt for ideology, New Labour's intellectual apologists such as Giddens and then *Observer* editor Will Hutton obviously felt the need to find some deeper rationale for the government's programme. Therefore they spins words about a 'Third Way'. According to Mr Blair himself, it is 'neither New Right nor Old Left' (*Times*, 25 July 1998). He argued that it is based on values, not on 'outdated ideology' (one wonders whence values are to be derived)

The new book from Alex Callinicos is a rigorous critique of this politics, focusing mainly on New Labour. Wisely, he does not simply dismiss talk of a Third Way as mere spin. He attacks not just its poor track record at terms of government performance but also the theoretical underpinnings provided by Giddens and others. Mr. Blair himself soon took to strutting the world stage, donning the mantle of crusader against evil rogue states like Afghanistan and the terrorists they harbour. At home, he crusaded against the evils of conservatism in institutions, especially those of the public sector. 'Conservatism' to him means an unwillingness to 'modernise' (a key word in the Third Way lexicon even if it really means deregulation and an opened door to private profit-making). Little changed when Blair was replaced by Gordon Brown, who was in any case the more intellectual of the two and had play the key role in the launch of the disastrous "Private Finance Initiative", a policy which enriched big business whilst saddling the public with enormous debts for decades to come.

The book was opportune in another way. The broad green movement had not produced an in-depth critique of Third Wayism. True it has been quick to condemn the betrayals of past promises and rank hypocrisies. Arms traders have continued to prosper under New Labour despite all the talk of new 'ethical' foreign policy, for example. More generally, the Third Way has turned out to be one way — ever rightwards. But a coherent critique was necessary and Callinicos does a good job.

At one level, New Labour reflects the general thrust of mainstream thought, namely that grand political theory and programmes for comprehensive root-and-branch change are dead in the water. Labour thinkers share the widespread notion that we have come to the 'end of history', in Fukuyama's oft-quoted phrase. All that needs to be done is to find safe and skilful hands to (lightly) exercise governmental power since anything more radical is neither necessary nor practicable.

All change

At the heart of the Labour vision is a mania for 'modernisation'. It ridicules 'stick-in-the-mud' elements such as those trade unionists who resist Labour's programme for change. It has little time for those fuddy duddies who doubt the wisdom of genetic engineering, don't relish work in call centres, don't want their towns turned into shiny new shopping malls or even, perish the

thought, think that human nature might be best suited to rhythms other than those of the 24 hour society.

In practical terms, New Labour's politics boils down to technique, not set policies, focusing on administrative competence appropriate to the drive for innovation and expansion. At least, this is the image they project. Such pretensions are somewhat contradicted by the persistence of old-fashioned cronyism and sleaze (Lord Derry Irvine, Geoffrey Robinson, Peter Mandelson, Gus Macdonald, Derek Draper etc.) plus continued cover-ups and a general unwillingness to admit mistakes (the foot-and-mouth disaster etc.)

Another aspect of New Labour's penchant for novelty is its creation of new institutions. Long-established structures of the civil service and local government as well as education and welfare are deemed to be 'failing'. The government prefers, instead, to work through a maze of voluntary organisations and special action zones, circumventing traditional channels. Within government circles, semi-detached special policy units, think tanks and quangoes have become the order of the day.

Friends of fat cats

Whereas former Tory Prime Minister Ted Heath once admitted that capitalism had an unacceptable face, Tony Blair believes that it has no such thing - it only smiles. In the eyes of New Labour, Big Business knows best. For all the talk of Cool Britannia, New Labour has taken Britain back to the days when American capitalists and their acolytes argued that "what's good for General Motors is good for America".

Mr Blair has gone out of his way, for example, to defend the 'business interest' from the alleged threat to private profit from European Union social legislation. Similarly, a string of 'fat cats' from big business has been signed up by the government to advise as well as head public and semi-public organisations. The government is reluctant to administer more than a slap on the wrist for the disastrous examples of business greed and general damage to the public good.

Callinicos documents all this and much more. He does so from a more rounded theoretical framework. The blurb on the book cover states that the author is Professor of Politics at York University. What it omits is that he is also a leading theoretician of the Socialist Workers Party, a British 'neo-Trotskyist' organisation perhaps largest of all the groups on the Far Left. This background explains his concerted – and successful – efforts to locate New Labour in an older Labour tradition of seeking to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism but not overturn the system that inevitably creates them.

For a Marxist, Callinicos is surprisingly reticent when it comes to the social basis of the Third Way and politicians that espouse it. One explanation seems plausible. Both the bureaucratisation inherent in modern industrialism and the increased complicatedness of life in general have together brought forth vast new layers of lawyers, accountants, managers, not just in private business but also quangoes and professionalised voluntary groups. Both Hilary Clinton and Cherie Blair are examples of this phenomenon. Basically, such social groups are parasitic classes. They play no productive role nor do they heal, educate, entertain and otherwise provide essential support for others. Yet modern society has created ideal niches from which such new social layers can challenge successfully for leadership roles in society.

World Class

Chapter One links the rise of Third Wayism to the broader process of so-called globalisation. His sense of capitalism-as-a-system also enables him to go beyond the rather shallow critiques of globalisation penned by the likes of Naomi Klein in her trendy book *No Logo*. Such works paint a picture of a world ruled by robber barons whereas in reality they too are subject to the anarchic logic of the system (albeit prisoners living in luxury unlike the real victims in the sweatshops, shanty towns and refugee camps that blot the global landscape).

Furthermore, he refutes the exaggerated image of globalisation that sometimes pops up in the pages of *The Ecologist* and similar publications. He demonstrates that transnational corporations are not as powerful as often pictured. In particular, he questions whether they are quite as footloose as some anti-globalisation writers suggest. Conversely, he argues that governments are nowhere nearly as powerless as both politicians, by way of finding excuses, and their critics

claim. In passing he demolishes much of the hype about an emergent 'knowledge economy' (e.g. Castells and his theory of new 'informationalism').

There is perhaps a strain of 'economism' running through this work, explaining too much in reductionist economic terms. The thinking at the heart of both Old and New Labour and indeed most conventional parties, is not just 'pro-capitalist' but more an expression of a deeper and broader worldview. It might be called the 'Cult of Progress'. Though it has obvious connections with capitalist economics, it is not a necessary nor direct one. It also guided the thinking of planners in the Communist régimes, for example (though, to be fair, Callinicos would see such systems as 'state capitalism' not any form of socialism).

At its heart is a mentality of 'moreness': more people consuming more things, courtesy of more powerful technologies and more control over every aspect of life ('designer babies' and so forth). This constitutes, in the words of Christopher Lasch, "the only true heaven". As American biologist Garrett Hardin once put it, "growth, change, 'development', spending, rapid turnover (are) viewed as goods without limits" Such ideas are usually summed up in that little word, 'progress'. Anything else is backward, undeveloped, waiting to be developed or 'take off' in the direction of those societies blessed with the widest array of consumer goods and technological devices.

The socialist tradition is as much imbued with such thinking as other modern ideologies. Indeed, beneath the surface of later parts of *Against the Third Way* lurks the cornucopian notion that it is only the 'relations' of production that hold back the attainment of abundance for one-and-all. There is no sense of inherent limits in the real wealth of nations, the Earth's life-support ecosystems. Callinicos shares certain unacknowledged fundamental assumptions with those he attacks. Nonetheless this does not blunt the force of his onslaught against the Third Way and its advocates.

New Order

Chapter 2 looks at a characteristic of New Labour in particular, its widely noted desire to rigidly manage and manipulate. One symptom has been the clamping down on all dissent inside the Party. It also takes the form of an intense manipulation of public relations, hence the substitution of political argument by the smart sound bite and 'spin doctoring'.

Callinicos broadens the argument. He shows how the drive for conformity goes much further, especially in terms of social policy. There have been recurrent campaigns denouncing feckless and otherwise disruptive groups in society, ranging from 'incompetent' teachers to the 'welfare dependants'. Words like 'crackdown' come easily to Labour lips. In some cases, it has shown an intolerance and lack of compassion worse than their Tory predecessors, no mean feat.

It might be wondered why, when New Labour is keen on innovation, it is so 'old-fashioned' in other matters. In fact, as Callinicos demonstrates, the two positions go together. If society is to be thrown into the whirlwind of globalisation and technological revolution, the shutters need to be pulled down tight in terms of social discipline. If the economy and technology are not to be controlled, people must be made so managed that human quirks and social customs do not get in the way. This has even included the setting of 'proper' bedtimes for school children as in Mr Blunkett's 'Sure Start' education programme!

Labour does made much noise about social cohesion and community. Some readers may remember the brief vogue for a related Third Way idea, 'communitarianism', another American import. However, in practice, its focus is a crackdown on 'aberrant' behaviours and lifestyles, ones which threaten to disrupt business-as-usual. It has no commitment whatsoever to policies that really might renew true community, not least through the creation of vibrant local economies.

At certain points, Callinicos somewhat ducks the very real problems posed by the breakdown of community and family structures. There is a strain of social permissiveness here that views lifestyles and social structures as basically a matter of purely personal choice, all of equal validity. He condemns 'laissez-faire' when it comes to economics but not in social life. As a result, he does not give due attention to the dangers posed by crime, drug abuse, yobbish behaviour, and a host of other anti-social activities which, again cannot be put down to purely economic factors such as unemployment (many football hooligans, for example, have secure, well paid jobs).

He particularly attacks writers like David Selbourne who argue that the characteristically modern adoration of individualism has led to a destructive imbalance between personal rights and responsibilities. I assume that he would have equally little time for Melanie Phillips who

relentlessly attacks related trends in the education system (see her book *All Must Have Prizes*). Yet such critics should be not dismissed as right-wing élitists looking back to some golden age when everyone know his or her place. There are broader issues here that deserve more open-minded discussion than Callinicos is able to give (the writings of Neil Postman and the late Christopher Lasch are particularly useful, not least the notion of an 'infantilised society')

Emperors with no clothes

The tendency towards economism surfaces again in Chapter 3, a critique of the Third Way vision of a new world order in which the likes of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair act as planetary policemen, stamping on any local disorders. Callinicos tends to see such troubles as reactions against capitalism's consequences. He makes several telling points about the way the system Bush and Blair support both brings economic misery to millions of people, generating violent backlashes. He finds self-serving purposes behind the humanitarian protestations of Third Way leaders. Indeed some of his co-thinkers are explaining the onslaught against Afghanistan in terms of a drive by the leaders of the industrialised west to get access to oil supplies from the Caspian region.

Perhaps he stretches his argument too far. Many millions also welcome American-style lifestyles, fighting to get into the local McDonalds, not burn it down. It would credit advertising with too much influence to explain the popularity of fast food, American movies and like as merely the product of clever marketing. More worryingly, religious fundamentalism in general and terrorism in particular seem to have their own dynamic, apart from any economic causation or political motivation (e.g. solidarity with Palestinians). Independent factors such as sheer hatred of 'otherness' and downright ignorance surely play some part.

However, the biggest difficulty in this part of the book is the absence of a plausible strategy to deal with the likes of Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic and Osama bin Laden. If Hussein were to launch more gas attacks against the Kurds, what should be the immediate response to stop it? Callinicos certainly has much to offer regarding longer term answers but he suggests much less regarding the here and now. One doesn't need to become a supporter of NATO or the Bush crusade (as has happened with the German Green Party leadership and former radical critics like Christopher Hitchens) to recognise the complex dilemmas we face.

Which Crisis? What answers?

The final section of the book looks at possible alternatives. It is here that, for the first time, Callinicos acknowledges issues such as pollution and climate change. But something in his worldview prevents from recognising the all-important and all-embracing nature of the ecological crisis. Instead Callinicos tends to treat the ecological crisis is but one issue amongst many, another stick with which to beat capitalism and its supporters. He fails to grasp fully the depth and breadth of ecological decline and the impact it will have.

For instance, the end of the age of cheap oil is not far around the corner. It will pull the plug on every aspect of contemporary lifestyles that depend upon cheap fuel. Yet little space is devoted to this cataclysmic prospect. Water shortages are also likely to spread while soil erosion continues apace. Callinicos does not even mention of the rapidly worsening holocaust of other lifeforms, perhaps because his worldview is so resolutely human-centred. Revealingly, he sees global warming only in terms of greenhouse gases (this permits him to put all the blame on the fossil fuel corporations), ignoring the part played by, say, deforestation (something that raises more difficult questions about human numbers and lifestyles).

Callinicos argues that there is a real strand of environmental understanding in the Marxist canon, not least in the writings of Marx himself. The example he cites of chemical pollution of the land by capitalist farming actually demonstrates the limits of that awareness. The impacts of agriculture on the Earth are far older and far deeper than the use of nitrates by agribusiness. One might equate the writings of Marx with those of, say John Muir, crudely speaking a contemporary, to see the gap

Overall, the world's problems are perceived primarily in terms of capitalist *mal*development. In reality, in a geologically finite, entropy limited and ecologically interconnected world, there are very real limits to human numbers and per capita consumption levels. The global crisis is one of both *mal*development and *over*development. Further attempts at more physical production, no

matter how well planned and managed, can only be achieved at the expense of a lowering of the long-term capacity of environmental systems to sustain life.

Though, as doubtless Callinicos would quickly and rightly point out, there are dramatic differences in consumption levels between individuals and social groups, what matters ultimately is the total impact of human society as a whole on local, regional and global ecosystems. It is now largely unsustainable. The Ehrlichs, for example, estimate that already 'our one species has co-opted or destroyed some 40% of potential terrestrial productivity.' Coppinger and Smith estimate that, on present trends, by the year 2020 humans and their domesticated animals, particularly cattle, together will constitute 20% of the world's animal biomass. By 2050, at least 60% of all terrestrial animal biomass and 25% of all plant life would be composed of humans and a few domesticated species. Far from baking a bigger cake, such trends will destroy the very oven!

For such reasons, the ecocrisis should be seen as the overriding issue. Correspondingly, all political programmes must be judged primarily in terms of their relevance to the lasting resolution of that crisis. Perhaps the most hopeful aspect of this book, however, is that writers like Callinicos are beginning to see those ecological connections. The typical Marxist tract of, say, thirty years ago, would have dismissed fears of ecological meltdown and the related concept of limits-to-growth as but an ideological ploy by the rich to cheat the poor out of their just entitlements. This opens the door to a genuine dialogue between 'reds' and 'greens'. The latter need to take on board the arguments of writers such as Callinicos about the nature of capitalism. But 'reds' need to be more open to green perspectives (not least stop equating fears about overpopulation with 'ecofascism').

The alternatives put forward in Chapter 4 and in the Afterword do not go beyond a rather vague 'anti-capitalism'. For example, he argues that the enemy is not 'globalisation' but 'global capitalism'. Yet the large-scale transportation of goods from one side of the planet to the other will always create unsustainable side-effects whether it is organised on a capitalist or any other basis. There is little sense of what the alternative would actually look like. Here readers would have to turn to books like Richard Douthwaite's *Short Circuit* or Ted Trainer's *Conserver Society*

In terms of the means by which an alternative society might be brought out, Callinicos proffers the rather predictable menu of mass struggle and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. We have been waiting rather long time for that! More plausibly, he looks to a coming together of all the various protests that are erupting across the planet against IMF-imposed austerity programmes, megadevelopment schemes and other forms of global madness. Only time will tell how realistic that vision really is.

In the meantime, Callinicos has done sterling work exposing the hollow pretensions of the Third Way. His university background enables him to cover more scholarly debates on issues such as globalisation, hegemony and justice. This will appeal to readers with a more academic interest in these matters. He wears his erudition lightly, writing in a very accessible way. At the same time, his book also has much offer activists in the anti-globalisation and broad green movements. It deserves a wide readership.

Sandy Irvine