

Introduction: new histories of Labour and the left in the 1980s

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The forward march of Labour halted

In 1980, notwithstanding the defeat of the Labour government the year before, the political left in its various forms remained a major presence in British life. Local government, the media, trade unions, pressure groups, the arts and academia: all were often dominated by left-of-centre voices that created networks of opposition to the recently elected Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Since the reforming Labour government of 1945, the liberal left had some reason to believe that it had shaped the orthodoxies of modern Britain with the welfare state, Keynesian economic policy and the liberal reforms that abolished censorship and challenged gender and racial discrimination. It was still possible, in 1980, for some to believe that a socialist future beckoned.

By the end of the decade, a wrecking ball had shattered these assumptions completely. Not only did the Conservatives win landslide majorities against Labour in the elections of 1983 and 1987 but the organised labour movement was defeated time and again, its rights heavily reduced and its bargaining power diminished by mass unemployment. Labour's left-leaning manifesto in 1983 was dubbed by Gerald Kaufman MP, 'the longest suicide note ever penned', and the party received just 28 per cent of the popular vote, barely ahead of the centrist alliance of the Liberals and the new Social Democratic Party (SDP). Right-wing newspapers ran articles about a so-called 'loony left' obsessed with political correctness but out of touch with ordinary people and popular culture. Attempts at creating a left-wing mass newspaper, the *News on Sunday*, failed miserably, while Rupert Murdoch's newspaper, the *Sun*, would go on to claim that it won the 1992 election for John Major. At a global level, the socialist world was collapsing, a transformation marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall

in 1989 and the Gorbachev reforms in the country that soon ceased to be the Soviet Union. The Communist Party of Great Britain actually wound itself up in 1991. Tony Benn argued that the challenge for the left was to win the argument for socialism. By any reckoning, the 1980s was the decade when the argument for socialism was lost.¹

Yet the 1980s was in many ways a creative decade for the left. Victories may have been few but there was no lack of energy. The party managed to get the first black MPs elected to Parliament.² In 1984 Chris Smith, Labour MP for Islington, became the first openly gay MP. Opposition to nuclear weapons resurfaced as a major agitation while the possible hazards of nuclear power were highlighted.³ The plight of the unemployed was placed at the top of the political agenda. Miners' support groups created networks of solidarity.⁴ The Greater London Council (GLC) became a popular cause when faced with abolition and promoted new kinds of politics which helped to shape the wider social agenda.⁵ Feminists and anti-racism campaigners fashioned a new common sense about personal identities. There was an assault on the idea that it was acceptable to pay women less than men, while issues around sexual harassment became more prominent later in the decade. AIDS and the introduction of Clause 28 changed the gay community and gave it a renewed political focus. Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Ken Livingstone, Derek Hatton, Beatrix Campbell and Arthur Scargill were key figures of the age. Labour (while diminished by the defection of members to the SDP) ended the decade as the main opposition party, a position that had seemed in doubt after the 1983 election. The early years of Channel 4 television provided a platform for alternative forms of politics and social identity to be expressed. Films like *The Ploughman's Lunch* and plays like David Hare's *Pravda* challenged the Thatcherisation of society. Red Wedge, alternative comedians, Band Aid, television series like *Spitting Image*, *Edge of Darkness*, *The Boys from the Blackstuff* and *A Very British Coup*: these were all part of a thriving left-of-centre popular culture.

Where Thatcherism prided itself on family values, Britain became a society in which divorce and cohabitation without marriage became more common. Where Thatcherism suggested private enterprise was the answer, the British remained doggedly attached to the National Health Service. Polls at the end of the decade suggested that, despite substantial victories (on a diminishing share of the popular vote), Thatcherism had still not transformed popular opinion, which continued to value public services and many aspects of the so-called 'nanny state'. The idea of a counter-culture is one that we associate with the 1960s, but it is fruitful to insist on the significance of alternative ways of living in the 1980s, evident in environmental activism (in 1989 the Green Party managed to get 14.5 per cent of the vote in the UK election for the European Parliament, although it gained no MEPs). After 1990, it was common to argue that the right had won the economic argument but the left had won the social and cultural argument.

The 1980s was therefore a contested and conflicted decade. Any account of the 1980s which simply looks at the triumph of Thatcherism is inadequate. Labour and the left may have failed electorally but they still mattered and shaped the political landscape. We need to think about the way in which Labour and the Conservatives defined themselves in relation to each other.⁶ Both the right and the left abandoned the post-war consensus at about the same time. The SDP spoke for a renewed progressivism of the radical centre that was in danger of being eclipsed by the drift of the main parties towards the left and the right. This kind of politics was as much part of the period as Thatcherism.

Historians need to make sense of the cultures of the left and explore where they failed, and also where they had an impact. *Labour and the left in the 1980s* is an attempt to excavate this territory. The deeper academic study of the 1980s is now commencing, driven in part by the release of cabinet papers for the Thatcher years and also through the need to come to a reckoning with the most decisive decade in recent British history.⁷ This book represents an attempt to make sense of this record and to establish the 1980s political left as a historical problem that requires rigorous research and analysis.

We adopt a wide understanding of the term 'left'. The volume takes the left to be the kaleidoscope of political institutions, ideologies and mentalities that challenged laissez-faire capitalism and promoted what it considered to be social justice in different ways on both a domestic and a global level. The left, for example, was formed by the international situation: the Cold War and the arms race, the decline of the Soviet Union, but also left-wing regimes in Latin America and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.⁸ The chapters by Callaghan (chapter 6) and Davis (chapter 5) in this volume document the ways in which the left mentally lived abroad, taking up issues of oppression around the world. In this sense, the radicals of the 1980s generation were heirs to a strand of internationalism that had been a feature of left-wing politics since the Chartists and which had shaped the Labour Party throughout its history.⁹ It is difficult to understand the approach of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader after 2015 without understanding the way that he was formed by the left-wing internationalism of the 1970s and 1980s.

The decade was the moment when the left had to fully confront changes in class structure, when issues around race, gender, sexuality and environmentalism began to challenge class as the dominant left-wing paradigm. Neil Kinnock's Labour Party (particularly after the 1987–88 policy review) and intellectuals around the periodical *Marxism Today* offered a fundamental revision of the standard left-wing project.¹⁰ Even before the decade began, Eric Hobsbawm's article, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' in 1978, had triggered a wave of debate on the left about whether class could provide the basis for mass mobilisation as it had previously done.¹¹ Political imagery based on the cloth cap was out of date in an age when workers bought their council

houses, holidayed abroad and (briefly) purchased shares. This book recovers struggles that were sometimes unsuccessful but which were nevertheless an important part of the period. Despite the opprobrium directed at the so-called 'loony left', Labour remained true to the values of social liberalism, as Paul Bloomfield examines in chapter 3. Although liberal figures like Roy Jenkins defected to the SDP, it was Labour and the broader culture of the left which challenged sexism, racism and homophobia and stood for equal opportunities. This volume attempts an unsentimental analysis of the way that the forward march of labour was dramatically halted in the 1980s.

This Introduction (like this volume) does not claim to be exhaustive but sketches out some key ways of interpreting the trajectory of both Labour and the left in the age of Thatcherism. It begins with an examination of Labour's progress in the 1980s and the problems it ran into. We then seek to interpret the challenges of the decade by viewing them in terms of the longer history of Labour politics in Britain. Following that, we adopt an international lens, discussing Labour in the context of the global left in the era that saw the collapse of communism. The Introduction ends with an interrogation of the culture and ideology of the British left. We emphasise the kinds of identity that the left provided and suggest some leads that scholars of the future may wish to pursue.

Labour in the Foot and Kinnock era

There are worrying signs that the labour movement is simply not willing to grasp, or is incapable of grasping, the seriousness of the position into which it has fallen. (Stuart Hall)¹²

Objects, places and moments that defined the left in the 1980s. Michael Foot's shabby 'donkey jacket' at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day in 1981. The cardboard city of homeless people on London's South Bank. A policeman's truncheon. Tony Benn's claim that eight million people voted for socialism in the 1983 election. Gay's the Word bookshop. The use of the term 'The Cuts'. Riots at Toxteth in Liverpool. The branch meeting with uncomfortable seats in a cold community centre. The miners' walk-out at Cortonwood Colliery, South Yorkshire in 1984. The SDP accepting payments by credit card. The women's peace camp at Greenham Common. Neil Kinnock taking on Militant at the 1985 Labour Party conference. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) insignia. A car on fire during the Poll Tax riots in Trafalgar Square in 1990. The Labour Party's red rose emblem. Billy Bragg's melancholic but defiant rendition of 'Between the Wars'.

These are snapshots of the diverse left-wing culture in Britain. The Labour Party has never enjoyed a monopoly of the left. Many left-wing groups have been suspicious of it and even opposed to it. The SDP considered itself to be left of centre but felt compelled to abandon Labour as it seemed incapable of change. The left has often been fractured and subject to charges of betrayal.

For many in the public, the evident divisions within the Labour Party (branded across the media) rendered it unelectable.

After the defeat of Jim Callaghan's government in 1979, his party shifted leftwards.¹³ The 1974–79 Labour governments were believed by many to have failed. Labour was divided over Europe. In the 1975 referendum on the Common Market (as it was then called), Michael Foot and much of the left opposed Britain's continuing membership, while many on the right of the party (who would later join the SDP) supported remaining in Europe. But the divisions ran deeper still. Following the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis of 1976, Callaghan had been forced to make cuts in the welfare state which hit the very people Labour was meant to represent. The government had been elected in 1974 on the basis that it could deal with the unions, but this was fatally damaged by the chaos of the 'winter of discontent' in 1979, when rubbish piled up in the streets and flying pickets brought the country to a standstill.¹⁴ Stagflation further undermined Labour's economic credibility although Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey managed to reduce both inflation and unemployment (and to pay off the IMF loan) by 1979. After that year's general election, there was bitterness about the government's record, which the Conservatives attacked but few on the left were willing to defend.

This volume focuses on the long 1980s (from the general election of 1979 to that of 1992). There were two broad phases of left-wing activity. Faced with the coming of Thatcherism, there was a dramatic mobilisation of the left. Tony Benn emerged as the left's champion, damning the compromises of the Callaghan government of which he had been a part and insisting that policy should be driven by the views of the party itself (unions and ordinary members rather than the Parliamentary Labour Party). Michael Foot, the left's tribune since the 1950s, became Labour leader in 1980 (triggering a civil war within the party which led to the formation of the SDP).¹⁵ The decision of the Conservative government to accept American cruise missiles led to the revival of the CND and Labour's decision to support unilateral nuclear disarmament (a cause Foot was associated with). Tony Benn, the new standard bearer of the left, challenged Denis Healey for the deputy leadership and was only narrowly defeated in 1981. The Militant Tendency emerged as a key left-wing movement in some cities, proving a challenge for the Labour leadership.¹⁶ In 1979, Labour moved left as the centre of political gravity in the nation moved right. It had entered a wilderness in which it would stay for eighteen years (until 1997).

In retrospect, this leftward swing came to an end not with Labour's massive defeat in the 1983 general election or the selection of Neil Kinnock as Labour leader that followed, but with the miners' strike of 1984–85. There had been hopes by Labour activists that the miners could repeat what they had accomplished in 1974, when they in effect brought down the Conservative government of Edward Heath. The strike, however, was not mandated by a strike

ballot, the miners ended up divided and the government had stockpiled sufficient coal to keep the country going. The miners were defeated just as they had been in the General Strike of 1926. The defeat of the print unions, who challenged Rupert Murdoch's move of his newspapers from Fleet Street to Wapping shortly after (in 1986), was no less momentous as it became a struggle over the introduction of new technology in which trade unions were perceived as the custodians of vested interests and restrictive practices. It was clear that the notion of extra-parliamentary opposition to the Thatcher governments was not going to work.

The labour movement and the left also had difficulty coming to terms with the larger economic forces unleashed by new technology and the global movements of capital epitomised by the Big Bang in the City of London. The left seemed backward looking, and Keynesian social democracy, which had once been considered so robust, now appeared fragile and a fleeting moment in Britain's post-war development. Opposition seemed increasingly futile because the left could not offer convincing alternatives to a world shaped by neo-liberalism. Yet this was a complex moment. The failure of the SDP and the Liberals (in an alliance) to make a breakthrough at the elections of 1983 and 1987 meant that Labour was confirmed in its role as the main party of opposition to the Tories. This showed an underlying strength in the Labour Party in these years.

The second half of the 1980s saw a wave of revisionism on the left coming to the fore, epitomised by Neil Kinnock's attempt to reconstruct the Labour Party.¹⁷ Kinnock's historical significance is that, although steeped in the party of Bevan and Foot, he recognised Labour's need to change. To support the victimised, it was necessary to gain the votes of those who were not victimised. As Martin Farr shows in chapter 2 in this volume, Kinnock and the team around him placed increasing emphasis on image and presentation.¹⁸ The left recognised a need to be more in tune with 1980s style, ideas and concepts. This was the age of 'designer socialism' (a term laced with irony). Following Labour's defeat in 1987, the Party's policy review opened up new ideas, including the abandonment of unilateral nuclear disarmament (which, it was clear, the electorate would not accept).¹⁹ More positive noises were made about the value of markets as well as consumerism.²⁰ Marxist analysis was increasingly critiqued in academic circles for its economic reductionism. Margaret Thatcher's sale of council houses came to seem less heretical and there was an understanding that she had spoken to people's aspirations in a way that the left had not. A notable shift showed that something was changing: it was no longer seen as sufficient to blame reactionary views on 'false consciousness'. The views of ordinary people, even if sometimes unpalatable, had to be taken seriously and not simply dismissed.

John Lloyd took over as editor of the *New Statesman* from 1986–87, which was employed to force new ideas onto the agenda and shift Labour away from

the far left.²¹ Bryan Gould argued for wider share ownership, although on very different lines from the version promoted by Thatcherism.²² Roy Hattersley's *Choose Freedom* in 1987 updated Croslandite revisionism and defined democratic socialism in terms of liberty.²³ The 'New Times' project fostered by *Marxism Today* argued that Britain was living in an age of post-Fordism: the shift of manufacturing abroad and the emergence of new technology meant that the economy was no longer defined by the assembly-line techniques of Henry Ford.²⁴ Such an analysis was Marxist only in its broad-brush economic determinism. What was important about 'New Times' was its attempt to embrace new thinking. It sought to understand a society that was changing and where new kinds of identity were shaping politics. Designer socialism was not, however, sufficient to enable Labour to win in 1992. This proved to be one of the most decisive modern elections, as it revealed the need for an even more fundamental rethink. Out of this would emerge Tony Blair's New Labour.

This volume resists the view that Labour's political and economic thought was moribund during the 1980s. Labour sought to develop dynamic responses to secure growth in an age of increasing globalisation. Eric Shaw's chapter (chapter 1) shows that Labour embraced new views on the role of the state and state intervention in the economy. There was much talk of the development state in the 1980s which would aid economic growth. Linked to this process was the idea of a national investment bank (an idea revived in Labour circles after 2015), which Richard Carr explores in chapter 4. Much of this reflected the success of continental social democracy, which seemed an attractive alternative to Thatcherism. For that reason, Labour abandoned its suspicions of Europe and became committed to the European cause up until the 'Brexit' referendum of 2016.

This volume is an attempt to probe the issues that are at stake in understanding the trajectory of the British left after 1979. In this work we are moving into new territory, as the scholarly literature remains relatively limited. The 1980s left has been covered by sometimes brilliant journalistic accounts but is now coming under the scrutiny of academic historians.²⁵ What are the paradigms that should shape an exploration of the history of the left in the 1980s? Do historians have any special insights that differ from those of other commentators?

The chief paradigm of modern political history has concerned the relative autonomy of the political.²⁶ Sociological explanations sometimes have limited value in explaining the trajectory of politics. Why, for example, do workers vote Conservative (which, from one point of view, does not make sense)? There has been a greater emphasis on the contingencies of politics and the role of language and strategy in shaping political appeals. Political parties create constituencies of support at least as much as they reflect them.²⁷ In chapter 1 Eric Shaw shows how New Labour was dependent upon the rhetorical construction of 'Old Labour', which resisted serious analysis of the historical record.

Building a history of Labour in the 1980s requires an analysis of the ways in which the party responded to social change. The 1992 election showed that its attempts to create a political coalition of voters who were prepared to accept limited tax increases to pay for high-quality public services had failed. One phase of Labour's history came to an end and New Labour filled the void. The left focused on issues around welfare and not on the economy itself, where it tended to become more open to market-based solutions. There were, however, considerable continuities from Old Labour into New Labour (more so than adherents of either grouping often allow).²⁸

The remaking of class politics

This section argues that Labour's problems need to be seen in terms of the longer-term challenges that beset the party. The 1980s in some respects merely highlighted these longer-term trends and made them visible.

Any evaluation of Labour politics needs to consider the question of class and organised labour. Following the introduction of universal suffrage for both men and women between 1918 and 1928, the working class by any definition constituted the majority of the voting population. The Labour Party had developed a coherent identity based on the values of the working class in its organised form (through the trade union link) and on socialism (following the introduction of Clause 4 of the Party's constitution of 1918). However, Labour has never enjoyed a total monopoly of working-class people. The Conservatives have always managed to attract large numbers of working-class votes. In 1931 they even (in the form of the National Government) managed to win 55 per cent of the working-class vote.²⁹ The Labour Party has always had to look beyond its working-class base and appeal particularly to the professional middle classes.³⁰ In 1945, it managed to fashion a vast cross-class coalition of voters based on workers with also about 30 per cent of the middle-class vote.³¹

Labour was at its electoral high point in the 1940s and 1950s, not least because the Second World War had transformed the bargaining power of organised labour. The 1945 Labour Government introduced the welfare state (including the National Health Service) and a massive programme of nationalisation and secured Indian independence. In 1945, Labour received 47.8 per cent of the popular vote and in 1951 it actually managed to gain 48.8 per cent, a larger proportion of the electorate than the Conservatives, who actually won the election.

Labour's vote thereafter declined (and we should see the party's fate in the 1980s as part of this longer trajectory of electoral failure). There were many reasons for this, but let us note two factors that shaped the party's post-1951 fortunes. The first was the struggle over the direction that the party should take, having accomplished many of its major reforms when Clement Attlee was Prime Minister. The party was divided in the 1950s by the conflict

between Bevanites, who demanded a move to the left, and the revisionist approach favoured by Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell and party philosopher Tony Crosland, who suggested that socialism was better secured by economic growth and redistribution than by further nationalisation. The divisions between the two sides helped to keep the party out of power till 1964 but have continued to recur in various ways since then. This was true of Labour in the 1980s and of the party after 2015.

The second factor that damaged Labour was the development of affluence and mass consumerism. Post-war Labour and trade union politicians never quite knew how to react to a society that was simply very different from that of the interwar depression which had shaped their outlook. Even the coming of commercial television was opposed, while pop music and advertising were treated with suspicion by some.³² Such a society seemed to favour the Conservative Party, which marketed itself as the party of the consumers rather than of the producers (it also presented itself as the natural party of government, which made Labour seem the party of sectional interests). In the 1950s commentators noted the decisive influence of affluence, social mobility and ‘embourgeoisement’ which softened the edges of class divisions. Working people acquired a level of security that had been denied them in the interwar period.³³ Well before the 1980s, politics was becoming less tribal, as the re-emergence of the Liberal Party as a force in the 1960s and 1970s showed.

Yet it is worth putting this in some perspective. Despite the development of affluence, the Labour vote held up remarkably well in the 1950s (although not enough to win elections). Working-class life remained a struggle against poor living conditions and the snobbish belief that workers were somehow inferior because they did not buy into a middle-class view of the world. It was arguably only in the 1970s that affluence really began to reshape popular attitudes. Thatcherism was in some respects the expression of a new kind of society, increasingly impatient with bureaucracy, inflation and restrictions on consumer demands. While Harold Wilson managed to secure three election victories in the 1960s and 1970s, the fundamental divisions over political strategy and the reaction to affluence dogged not only Labour but left-wing politics in general.

We should therefore view the conflicts of the 1980s in part as the continuation of long-term problems which divided the left in the post-war period. The role of trade unions (integral to the corporatist politics of the 1960s and 1970s) became increasingly controversial.³⁴ Harold Wilson’s and Barbara Castle’s trade union reforms (*White Paper In Place of Strife*) had been defeated in 1969. Attempts at industrial partnership and a counter-inflationary incomes policy finally dissolved in the ‘winter of discontent’ in 1979. To a large extent, the great era of post-war social democracy was destroyed by the paradox that trade unions could bring down a union-backed Labour government. In theory

this should have been impossible, given that Labour was meant to be the party of the unions, and yet it happened. A significant number of trade unionists actually voted for Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (further evidence that sociological explanations for political behaviour may be problematic or, at least, reductive). Basic assumptions about the politics of class were being overturned. Labour and the left were associated with the promotion of unaccountable bureaucracies (the nanny state, nationalised industries), vested interests (trade unions) and opposition to individual choice. Many key promoters of Thatcherism (the journalist Paul Johnson, the economists John Vaizey and Alan Walters) were, significantly, people who had been on the left but had had a change of heart as they confronted the challenges of the 1970s and the unprepossessing nature of the Soviet Union. They brought the zeal of the convert to the Thatcherite project. A new kind of populist right-wing politics emerged which the left reacted to in different ways. Could the appeals of class and social solidarity still provide the basis of a mass politics? This is what was at stake in the politics of the 1980s.

Labour's civil war of the early 1980s was to some extent a replay of the divisions between Bevanites and Gaitskellites in the 1950s. In the 1980s case, many of the Gaitskellites, such as Roy Jenkins, opted to leave the party and form the SDP. Both Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock clothed themselves in the mantle of Aneurin Bevan (the political figure who most embodied Labour's idealism). It was obvious that the opposition vote to Thatcherism was divided, allowing the Tories to gain huge majorities in 1983 and 1987. For the first time, the left developed the niggling feeling that the historical momentum was not on its side. Yet the 1980s continued to provide models where solidarity with the struggles of workers could be the cause of mass mobilisation (as Maroula Joannou's chapter 8 on the miners' strike shows). Arguably, the decade proved to be the coda to an era of mass politics led by trade unions that lasted from the 1880s to the mid-1980s.

Another way of understanding the left in this period is to reflect on the way that it made sense of its past. It was heavily divided over the record of the Labour governments in the 1960s and (especially) the 1970s. There had always been a strain on the left which distrusted the parliamentary road to socialism.³⁵ The Wilson and Callaghan governments between 1974 and 1979 were accused by Tony Benn and others on the left of betraying their own supporters. The 1945 Labour Government was spoken of, however, with increased respect as Thatcherism threatened the achievements of the Attlee governments with its programme of privatisation. Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock continually extolled the way in which Labour had spoken for the nation after the war and changed it. Martin Farr's chapter 2 shows how Michael Foot's frame of reference was continually attached to the past, particularly the 1930s (one reason why Foot came to support the Falklands task force was his long-standing opposition to appeasement and determination to

resist dictators). Nostalgia was built into Labour's psyche, making it seem rather backward looking and adrift from a changing society (which explains why New Labour in the 1990s was so uninterested in the party's past).³⁶

We should see the 1980s as highlighting conflicts over competing notions of class loyalties, social mobility and individual aspirations that have shaped British politics ever since. These questions were not entirely new but the issues were redefined as it appeared that the notion of the traditional working class was changing.³⁷ Work itself was taking new forms with the development of service industries and the decline of manufacturing. The signature policy of Thatcherism proved to be the privatisation of state-owned industries and services. Nationalisation had been at the core of the way many on the left defined socialism. By the later 1980s, it was clear that the privatisations of the Thatcher governments would be difficult to reverse. Globalisation, membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the destruction of Britain's industrial base meant that the idea of socialism in one country was increasingly untenable. The Alternative Economic Strategy floated by Tony Benn in 1976 (which involved import controls, protectionism and a siege economy) was quickly abandoned even by the left. The experience of the 1970s and 1980s suggested that in an international marketplace governments could not control their own destiny. In time, this became a problem for the right (as it began to turn against Europe), but it also meant that the left lacked an economic policy. The chapters by Eric Shaw (chapter 2) and Richard Carr (chapter 4) explore how Labour attempted to fill this void.

Changes in class structure were not the only problem. We should view the experience of the left through the prisms of gender and race (themes in the chapters of Maroula Joannou and Robin Bunce, 8 and 9, respectively). It became apparent that the twentieth-century labour movement had thrived on a view that privileged white, male workers. Yet women had always been part of the labour force although trade unions often had a problematic relationship with them. The spectacle of dock workers supporting Enoch Powell after 1968 challenged the view that working-class people always held progressive views. The mythology of a heroic working class struggling against oppression and embodying the promise of a new society (the essence of the Marxist view) was challenged from within as it became clear how oppressive many of these same workers could be.

Changes in economic structure validated women's roles in the work-force. The experience of labour in the 1980s required an acknowledgement that the labour force was changing and that it was extremely diverse. Left-wing politics ever since has been an attempt to come to terms with this reality. There were demands for there to be black and women's 'sections' within Labour (a move resisted by the party as sectarian). The white working-class no longer seemed like heroic agents of change and in time would be vilified as 'chavs' or the 'underclass' or (in time) as 'left behind' voters who would be as likely to vote

for the anti-immigrant United Kingdom Independence Party in the early twenty-first century as to vote Labour.³⁸

The global dimension

It is limiting to view this subject purely through a purely British lens. This book is distinctive in its ambition to situate the left within both the national and the global context. The declining fortunes of the British left matched the fortunes of the left in many (but not all) countries and need to be seen in that wider perspective. Socialist and social democratic parties were regularly defeated. In the United States Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush began to unpick the New Deal Order that was embodied by the Democratic Party.³⁹ We need to consider the British left with reference to global politics and the international socialist movement, as both played an important role in defining its ideas and attitudes in the last decade of the Cold War. Labour was opposed to membership of Europe for much of the 1980s, until it discovered the virtues of Jacques Delors's social vision of Europe and considered it a means of circumventing Thatcherism.

At the same time, non-British influences helped to define Labour's ideas and actions at different times in the twentieth century.⁴⁰ Global affairs influenced Britain's domestic politics as similar issues to those that defined the 1930s – high unemployment, a new right-wing philosophy and changes in the USSR – again shaped international politics.

The USSR had long been an important international influence on Labour, and it was no less so in the 1980s. The country that supposedly embodied 'actually existing socialism' had exerted a particular hold on sections of the party since 1917, when events in Russia briefly pushed the British labour movement leftwards. There had been much talk of forming soviets and following the revolutionary ways of the country's Marxists.⁴¹ While this did not last, it left an interest in what was happening in the Soviet Union. The presence of a socialist alternative to liberal democracy and Labour's own strand of socialism continued until the end of the Cold War. Many visitors went to the USSR to see socialism supposedly being built, a fact which helped to define Labour's political thought in different ways.⁴² The thought and actions of this particular country influenced Labour's ideas and its vision as it further embraced planning and the notion of the state's having a more interventionist role in the socio-economic life of Britain.

Labour was also influenced by less extreme versions of state intervention, including Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States and Swedish social democracy. These tied in with ideas already present in the party, such as the Fabians' 'top down', managerial approach to politics. Between the wars, Labour's ideas concerning the state were shaped by the domestic problems that faced Britain during the Great Depression, by its own traditions, by

international revolutionary socialism and by more moderate, although no less international, alternatives to capitalism. After the war, Labour's Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, rejected closer links with the USSR and tied Britain's fortunes to the West and the USA. The Cold War side was picked, but some on the Labour left still saw the USSR and the 'people's democracies' in the Eastern Bloc as worthy of their support. Other alternative forms of socialism and social democracy were also discussed at various times during the Cold War, including Mao's China, Castro's Cuba and Hawke's Australia. Labour was therefore never a 'little Englander' party; nor was the left more generally.

By the 1980s, Labour had to determine where it stood on the decade's big global issues – the end of *détente*, the renewed East–West hostilities and the arms race, challenges to Soviet control in Eastern Europe and changes in the Soviet leadership. In 1984, Labour's leaders met with Mikhail Gorbachev, who told them of the USSR's concerns over Ronald Reagan's 'Star Wars' programme. Gorbachev hoped that there would be a 'demilitarisation' of outer space. Questions about nuclear disarmament had informed debates within the Labour Party since the early peace marches and were again important in this decade. Some rejected the notion of unilateral disarmament, while others embraced the radicalism of the protesters at Greenham Common.

Labour's 'modernisation' process was also influenced by its relations with the wider world. China had once attracted interest as an alternative model of socialism, but in the post-Mao age, Deng Xiaoping's market reforms led the country's economy down a very different path. This was also true in France and Greece, where socialist governments quickly adopted a more neo-liberal approach to the economy. And after Mikhail Gorbachev pursued his restructuring of the Soviet economy – and ultimately Soviet ideology – Labour soon followed suit and Neil Kinnock's policy review in 1987 led to his own *perestroika* of the Labour Party.

Many of these issues are discussed in the chapters by Callaghan (chapter 6) and Davis (chapter 5). Policies pursued by Labour in the 1970s – state ownership and state-directed economic policy, hostility to NATO and the EEC – were discarded in the 1980s not only by Labour but also by other European socialists.⁴³ And, after 1985, Gorbachev's restructuring of Soviet socialism had a significant impact on Labour's own political thought and helped it to move into a new ideological era. International politics and changing global circumstances thus played as influential a role in defining Labour's understanding of contemporary issues as domestic affairs did.

The left was rather more successful when fighting for human rights abroad. South Africa under apartheid was vilified and the cause of Nelson Mandela championed, while Margaret Thatcher's government appeared to do nothing to challenge the regime. There were mass demonstrations, part of an international cultural offensive that took in pop music ('Free Nelson Mandela'), sport and consumer boycotts. The left made it clear that apartheid South Africa

had pariah status, and supported the African National Congress in its struggle with racial injustice. In 1990 Mandela walked free and apartheid crumbled.

To be on the left in the 1980s involved spending a lot of time thinking about Nicaragua, Soviet dissidents and the Middle East. Closer to home, there were demands to withdraw British troops from Northern Ireland. The British left is sometimes criticised for its intellectual insularity.⁴⁴ This is true in some respects, but the wider world was central to the way the left viewed itself, from Neil Kinnock's opposition to nuclear weapons to anger about third-world hunger and the mounting level of debt in poorer countries.

Left-wing identities

How did the culture of the left change in the 1980s? Changing attitudes to gender, race and sexuality explain why the decade became increasingly shaped by the politics of identity. This was in some respects the left's response to the right's emphasis on choice. The new emphasis was on diversity rather than simply the collective. In this view, everyone is part of a minority of some kind. Issues about racial and sexual discrimination (neither of which was new in 1980) reached new prominence. The spectacle of women protesting at Greenham Common and the mobilisation of miners' wives during the strike offered examples of what seemed to some to be distinctly female forms of protest not shaped by masculine norms. The ways in which men and women experienced poverty differently became an issue.⁴⁵ The use of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 to prevent the alleged promotion of homosexuality by local authorities and schools caused outrage. The experience of the left in the 1980s suggested a move towards a new kind of politics, based on identity, choice and the individual.

The most enduring achievement of the post-Attlee Labour Party had been in the moral reforms of the 1960s, ending capital punishment, legalising abortion and homosexuality and ending censorship of the arts. In retrospect, the sexual politics of the 1980s left continued this tradition (see Paul Bloomfield's chapter 3).⁴⁶ Ken Livingstone's GLC, for example, recognised the competing demands of gays and lesbians for recognition and freedom from discrimination. This in turn triggered a right-wing response about the 'loony left' obsessed about 'political correctness'. Having been in the vanguard of 1960s liberalism and the avant garde, the left was denounced for being allegedly made up of puritans and kill-joys, eager to complain about any statement or form of behaviour that might be sexist or racist or in some way offensive. The Labour MP Clare Short, for example, condemned page 3 of the *Sun* newspaper, which featured photographs of naked women to boost sales. The emphasis on social diversity marked a shift away from the universalist approach of the left in its earlier forms. In retrospect, however, this emphasis on the rights of minorities and the celebration of difference created a politics of inclusiveness which

refashioned the social agenda. Economic liberalism in its Thatcherite form shaped modern politics thereafter, but it has since become difficult to succeed in politics without being some kind of social liberal. In retrospect, the final triumph of the 1980s left was the decision by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron to introduce gay marriage in 2014.

This also explains why the left increasingly turned to arguments about citizenship rather than socialism.⁴⁷ The creation of Charter 88 and its promotion by the *New Statesman* under the editorship of Stuart Weir in the later 1980s supported the introduction of a written constitution (to ensure basic civil liberties) and proportional representation as the way forward for the left. There were also calls for a popular front against Thatcherism made up of non-Tory forces from the Liberals through to the far left.

The character of the left was in many respects defined by Thatcherism and the need to oppose Tory legislation. Margaret Thatcher was clear that her aim was to destroy everything that the left stood for. This meant that left-wing politics were combative. Rising unemployment and the reform of trade union rights produced an angry response; so did 'the Cuts' (huge reductions in government spending on public amenities). The decision to accept American cruise missiles led to the revival of CND. Margaret Thatcher's celebration of Victorian values and her claim that there was no such thing as society led to accusations that she was turning the clock back to the era of extreme *laissez-faire* in the nineteenth century.

At the same time intellectuals such as Stuart Hall argued that Thatcherism was creating a new kind of hegemony and common sense which the left needed to find a way of contesting.⁴⁸ There were new strains of thinking that would commence the long task of bringing Labour back to power in 1997. The intellectuals around the think-tank Demos and *Marxism Today's* 'New Times' project laid the basis for New Labour by documenting how the economy was moving into a post-Fordist mode which rendered previous assumptions about political strategy redundant (although some of these figures subsequently repudiated New Labour). If capitalism was changing, it followed that the left had to change as well.

Another factor that contributed to the changing culture of the left was national identity. The huge popularity of Margaret Thatcher after the victory in the Falklands and the alleged role of the 'Falklands factor' in securing her electoral landslide in 1983 stunned many on the left. Class loyalties had been seen on the left as the important thing; workers possessed a class but not a nation (which was often viewed as a form of false consciousness). However, there was no mistaking the rise of different kinds of nationalist politics in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which had powerful appeal. Some felt that the appeals of patriotism had to be reworked in radical forms.⁴⁹ The popularity of the royal family was acknowledged but was also the source of a revived republicanism which argued that Britain's antiquated institutions needed to be

transformed in a modern polity.⁵⁰ Mass immigration had, in any case, required the notions of what constituted Englishness and Britishness to be fundamentally rethought. Citizens with families who came from other parts of the world, and particularly from Britain's former colonial possessions, sometimes challenged the romanticism about the empire and Britain's imperial past.⁵¹

Evaluations of the left in the 1980s follow some of the standard paradigms of labour history: the significance of class and movement cultures, the debates about ideology and strategy, the legal status of trade unions, the opportunities taken or missed, the role of riot and resistance, the attempts at alternative forms of living, the role of charismatic leadership. Yet, as this Introduction has shown, the 1980s was a decisive decade which transformed the place of labour in society.

New paradigms will also be necessary to evaluate the fate of the left after 1979. Many workers lost the kind of identity that unions gave them. Deindustrialisation and lack of union membership left them feeling abandoned, exposed to the currents of the global marketplace and doomed to working in a low-wage service economy. The move towards greater equality of incomes that had characterised the post-war decades came to an end in the 1980s and wealth increasingly became skewed towards people at the top.⁵² And yet living standards improved for most. Lower inflation and the shift towards reduced rates of income tax created (to quote John Kenneth Galbraith) 'a culture of contentment'.⁵³ Not much could be done to help the underclass when the majority had never had it so good. Movement politics had less purchase when politics started to become about issues of individual choice and aspiration. New dynamics had come into play.

The print culture of the left needs exploration. The 1980s was notable for the dramatic press onslaught on Labour.⁵⁴ Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock were pilloried and caricatured so that many voters could not take them seriously. The majority of the press barons (particularly Rupert Murdoch) supported the Conservatives and promoted a vicious campaign against Labour. Margaret Thatcher's government rarely had to worry about press coverage. Labour was, however, supported by Robert Maxwell's *Daily Mirror* and by the *Guardian* (although the latter was often positive about the SDP). There was also a wider alternative press that included *Militant* (supporters of Militant claimed that it was a newspaper and not a movement), the *New Statesman*, *Tribune*, *Socialist Worker* and *Class War*. There were concerns that the left was at odds with popular culture. The popularity of the *Sun* (with its heady cocktail of page 3 girls, bingo, celebrity gossip and joyous jingoism) suggested that the left had lost touch with what many ordinary voters wanted. When the *News on Sunday* was launched as a left-wing tabloid in 1987, it folded within seven months. It was worthy but dull, failing to find the right tone for a popular newspaper. By the end of the 1980s, the left seemed entirely at odds with popular culture. Historically, this was merely the continuation of an ongoing

discomfort that many left-wingers had with popular culture.⁵⁵ Keir Hardie on one occasion visited a Manchester theatre and was so shocked by a scene in which a woman sat on a man's lap that he walked out. Trade unionist Ben Tillett once complained: 'If the Labour Party could select a King, he would be a Feminist, a Temperance crank, a Nonconformist charlatan ... an anti-sport, an anti-jollity advocate, a teetotaller, as well as a general wet blanket.'⁵⁶ There was a discernible shift away from extreme puritanism in the later 1980s, evident in the appeal of alternative comedians such as Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle who showed that the left needed to have a sense of humour if it was to persuade.

The 1980s was the decade in which Labour had to concede that image and presentation mattered. It was symbolised by the decision of the party to adopt the emblem of the red rose (even arguing about how long the stem should be). The alleged control-freakery of the Blair years was founded in a feeling that arguments about policy were seen by the public as evidence that the party was divided and therefore unable to govern. It became increasingly important for Labour to be seen to speak in one voice (a view that contrasted with figures such as Ken Livingstone who believed that Labour should be a parliament of the left, priding itself on its rainbow-like appeal, with different political colours represented). The great literary treatment of 1980s Labour proved to be David Hare's play *The Absence of War* (1993), in which a Labour leader (clearly based on Kinnock) loses his authenticity and integrity when he is taken over by the spin doctors who stress the need to appeal a wider public.

Left-wing politics can fruitfully be analysed through the emerging history of the emotions. Many people on the left presented their politics in rigorously rationalistic form (although less so with reference to Marx as the 1980s went on). Yet politics is also a matter of temperament. We need to think seriously about the way left-wingers performed their politics (although comparable arguments could be made about people on the right). There were emotional responses to the 'boss class' and demands for 'street credibility'. There was the way the trauma and anguish of defeat had to be managed. There was the relish for the demo, the loud hailer and the mass meeting. The identity of the 'activist' was clearly important for some.⁵⁷ The language of altruism, compassion and social justice was important for all (with the implication that Tories lacked all of these qualities). Items of clothing could express some of these feelings: the donkey jacket, the 'Cole Not Dole' badge. There was a distinct material culture of the left. Clearly, much of this was also framed by gender and by social location. Labour in the 1990s seemed to have a different emotional vocabulary from the 1980s, where there was less of a knee-jerk desire to attack the leadership. Some of this was no doubt driven by the experience of continual defeat, which made party members look to Tony Blair, a figure who would not have been acceptable to the party ten years earlier.

The left was sometimes presented as humourless. To be on the left requires the view that ideas and strategies should mean something. This in turn leads to claims of betrayal and disputes about minor issues of policy or belief. There was a recognition on the left later in the decade that a joyless approach, looking disdainfully down on people who were not 'ideologically sound' (a vogue term usually employed ironically), was problematic when it came to developing a mass movement. More seriously, it suggested that the left was at odds with popular culture and with many working-class people who were viewed as racist, sexist, homophobic, jingoistic and addicted to the *Sun*.

There are other optics for exploring the left in the 1980s. These would include greater attention to the local and the personal. We need new histories of constituency Labour parties and the ways they operated. Alternative left-wing movements such as the Socialist Workers Party need greater treatment. So too does the history of student radicalism (a subject by no means confined to the 1960s). There were multiple cultures of activism more generally. At the same time, the figure of the activist was often unattractive to many who nevertheless possessed left-of-centre sympathies. This was a problem for the Bennite vision of activists' democracy. The 1980s ended with the emergence of a solid constituency concerned about environmental causes, evident in the 2,299,274 votes for the Green Party in the 1989 European election (although it gained no members of the European Parliament).

Labour's defeat in 1992 was a turning point. While hopes were high for a victory against John Major (who replaced Margaret Thatcher as Conservative Prime Minister in 1990), the defeat of Neil Kinnock's Labour Party suggested that a large part of the south of England would not elect a party that was committed to increasing taxation (even on those able to pay). This had a huge political and psychological impact. It made way for the coming of New Labour which was partly based on the belief that Labour would never win if it was simply associated with high taxation. There was also a psychological and emotional consequence. It seemed that Britain was doomed to permanent Conservative governments, making opposition feel pointless. Many people who had been politically active seemed to check out of politics and look elsewhere for sources of meaning.⁵⁸

Tony Blair argued that Britain changed in the 1980s but Labour failed to come to terms with this. For New Labour, it was important to recognise the motivating force of aspiration in the lives of ordinary people. It is difficult not to view the left of the 1980s in the light of New Labour (which, as Eric Shaw shows in chapter 1, was animated by a particular view of Old Labour). Blair's decision to abandon Clause Four and his relentless pursuit of 'Middle England' was a renunciation of a record of electoral failure under Foot and Kinnock.

At the same time, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015 and again in 2016 prompts some reconsideration of Labour's record, reminding us that there may be a number of alternatives to viewing the 1980s through a New Labour prism. The significance of Corbyn, very much a veteran of

Labour in the 1970s and 1980s, suggests that the left was not totally defeated at the end of the 1980s but went into a kind of hibernation (with the arguable exception of Ken Livingstone's period as Mayor of London). On the other hand, the youthfulness of Corbyn's supporters leads one to argue that they represent a distinctively new formation, rooted in the Iraq War, the 2008 recession, the Occupy movement and dismay about inter-generational theft. The Corbynite view would suggest that Labour in the 1980s abandoned principle and capitulated to neo-liberalism and a Cold War view of the world. The reality is more complex and it is the duty of scholars to tease out some of these complexities. For example, many of the key figures in New Labour had a history on the left which they never formally renounced.⁵⁹

This subject lends itself to exposition in a tragic mode. The labour struggles of the 1980s have provided subject matter for a wave of populist British cinema: *Brassed Off* (1996), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Pride* (2014). Lacking a name, this genre celebrates the decency of ordinary humanity and evokes a sense of solidarity that appears poignant because it is fast disappearing in contemporary Britain. These films show how far we have come. The 1980s resonates within modern popular culture because it carries the feeling of a world we have lost: the belief that Britain could be a different place and that there might be alternatives to a market economy. This viewpoint was crushed by the events of that decade. A new common sense emerged that differed from post-war Keynesian social democracy. The market was seen as liberating and market-based solutions were the best ones. The institutions of the state with its public services required privatisation or constant reform if they were to survive. The identity of the customer was as important as that of the citizen. Self-fulfilment was what counted.

History should, however, never just be written by the winners. We need more complex histories of the decade that shaped the way we live now. The left of the 1980s was easy to caricature at the time and still is: naive, idealistic, puritanical, hypocritical, given to idle gestures and rhetoric, backward looking (in the way radicals paradoxically so often are), always assuming it knew what was best for other people, so often succumbing to the narcissism of small differences which created splits and distrust. It had remarkably little to say about wealth creation. Yet there was also a serious moral purpose which set the left apart as well as a commitment to social improvement. In its various forms it contributed to the changing landscape of Britain in the 1980s. This volume explores some of the ways in which it did so.

Notes

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