SEBASTIAN BERG

The Labour Party's Ideas of the Working Class:
From Affluent Society to Austerity

1. Introduction: Labour, the Working Class(es), and Class Struggle

In a contribution on 'social class' to an edited book with the lyrical title *The Struggle for Labour's Soul*, Emmanuelle Avril commented: "To say that the *Labour* Party represents the interests of the manual working class would seem to state the obvious, yet the issue of whom Labour stands for is one of the most hotly contested issues of British politics" (2019, 102). Indeed, the party's relationship with the working class has not always been easy, the organisation's ideas about its supposed core constituency were not necessarily positive ones. A few roughly mid-20th-century examples, compiled by Labour historian Lawrence Black, prove the point: Ernest Bevin, foreign secretary in the postwar Labour government, complained about working-class people's poverty of desire (Black 2003, 26). Richard Crossman, left-winger and member of Harold Wilson's cabinets, criticised working-class interest in modern gadgets which he described as "irrelevant, immoral, vulgar" (qtd. in Black 2003, 28). Douglas Jay, junior minister in different functions, argued that "the man from Whitehall really does know better than the people themselves" (qtd. in Black 2003, 26). Denis Healy, at different times defence secretary, chancellor of the exchequer, and deputy party leader, asked in frustration during the Suez crisis: "What kind of people are you to allow a liar and a cheat to be your prime minister?" (qtd. in Black 2003, 28). Finally, a non-named Liverpool Labour MP replied to the proposal to plant trees on housing estates: "Trees? Oh! They'd pull 'em up in no time. Why, you cannot even keep a light bulb in a corridor two minutes" (qtd. in Black 2003, 26).

A later and arguably more serious example that illustrates Avril's observation is Neil Kinnock's speech at the Labour Party's 1984 annual conference. Kinnock had been the party's leader for a year then and used his position to condemn all sides' violence in the ongoing miners' strike. He deliberately took a stance different from the party's National Executive Committee's official line of supporting the miners in their protracted fight with the Thatcher government. On the occasion of this strike, a lifelong observer of Labour's internal debates, political scientist Leo Panitch, pointed out:

> The miners' strike signified an old fact about the Labour Party, that class struggles are not only represented by it or restrained by it, but appear within it and often divide it. And it revealed very clearly what was the most important aspect of the struggle inside the party, i.e., that it concerned the question of whether the Labour Party leadership was to seek office – and conduct itself once in office – on the basis of distancing itself from class struggles and indeed other popular extra-parliamentary struggles. (1987, 357)

Which side got the upper hand in this party-internal struggle depended to a large extent on the distribution of power within the party. In 1961, political scientist Ralph Miliband criticised the party from a Marxist perspective for its 'parliamentary

socialism.' The argument developed throughout the book accused the dominant faction in the party of following an electoralist and reformist strategy. By this, they precluded the possibility of transformative change in British society, domesticated the working class, confined its political struggles, and thus contributed to the stabilisation of British politics and the reproduction of existing class relations (Miliband 1961). However, as later developments show, the dominance of parliamentary socialism was occasionally challenged from within and beyond the party – for example in the early 1980s by the Bennites[1] and in the mid-2010s with the rise of the Corbynists, two formations that Leo Panitch and Colin Leys regard as conjoined in a 'project' of a 'Labour New Left' (2020).

When taking a long-term perspective, one notes that the Labour Party has passed through four phases since the early post-World War II years in which different constructions of and ideas on the British working class gained hegemonic positions. In the first phase, the party popularised a set of ideas about the increasingly affluent workers of the 1950s and 1960s. During the second, it oscillated between identifying the working class as victims of, or as responsible for, the crisis of welfare capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s. In the third, Labour dissolved the working class into a larger organic community in the 1990s and 2000s. In the fourth and continuing phase, working people have been re-established as the primary victims of post-2008 austerity policies and as a held-back class. Additionally, this fourth phase is characterised by a debate about who actually belongs to the working class(es) in the 21st century.

These changes testify to the impact of factors external to intra-party debates on a cluster of ideas. These include changes in public discourse on the shape and the state of Britain as a polity or social formation, on the dynamics and functioning of the British economy or British capitalism, and on the role of the British state or the tasks of British politics. Understanding the debates in the Labour Party in this way as structuring and structured, as both involved in shaping and itself shaped by such discursive struggles, invites analysing them through the lens of a cultural political economy (CPE) per-

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1   Bennism refers to a formation in the party associated with the politics of longstanding MP Tony Benn (1925-2014). Benn, minister and cabinet member in the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the 1960s and 1970s, became increasingly sceptical of the effectiveness of parliamentary politics in challenging class inequality and elite privilege and saw a need for complementing parliamentary work by extra-parliamentary campaigns for democratisation. Altering political power within the party, making it more bottom-up by, for example, empowering parties at constituency level, was to serve as a model for the democratic reorganisation of the British state and economy. Benn became the symbolic leader of the Labour New Left in the late 1970s but was narrowly beaten by Denis Healy in the deputy leadership contest of 1981. Once Neil Kinnock had succeeded Michael Foot as party leader in 1983, the Labour New Left split into a 'hard' and a 'soft left' wing, the latter supporting Kinnock's 'new realism.' Benn remained the spokesperson of the hard left which supported extraparliamentary struggle from the miners' strike in 1984/85 via the poll tax protests (1990) to opposition against the Iraq war (2003). Jeremy Corbyn was a close ally of Benn's. His leadership was seen as a renewed attempt at realising the Bennite project of democratisation in the party and beyond. For Benn's political ideas see Benn (1979; 1981) and Berg (2014); for his critique of parliamentary socialism see Panitch and Leys (1997); and for the parallels in Benn's and Corbyn's politics, see Coates (2019) and Wainwright (2016).

spective (Jessop 2004; Sum and Jessop 2013). CPE aims at identifying the discursive operations employed for the regulation and stabilisation of an inevitably crisis-prone capitalism. This article investigates the party's specific hegemonic understandings of the working class in the four phases mentioned above. My analysis employs a variety of sources, ranging from official party documents to senior party members' personal statements. They all contribute to discursive frameworks that solidify and retain a hegemonic position over longer periods of time but become more vulnerable to challenges in periods of crisis. Further, the article offers a CPE-based interpretation of the processes involved in new understandings substituting previous ones. Finally, it reflects on the question what this tells us about the Labour Party as a vehicle for social and political transformation, as an agent in class struggle, and as a voice in the debate on whether class is still a useful concept in a normative political project working for solidarity and equality.

2. Labour Imaginaries

2.1 Affluent Workers

The establishment of the postwar welfare state changed the living conditions of working-class people in Britain for the better. The dominant ideas of the postwar consensus in the 1950s and 1960s (formulated by Labour and to a considerable extent adopted by the Conservatives) were not about radically transforming the overall architecture of the British social formation but rather about improving working people's position in it. This conformed to the set of ideas usually called labourism and seen as the Labour Party's programmatic core – a pragmatic approach to dealing with the inequalities in society.[2] According to Geoffrey Foote, author of the most comprehensive history of the Labour Party's political ideas, labourism has five central tenets: (i.) the labour theory of value (the employers' appropriation of surplus value created by transforming material into a commodity through work), (ii.) the consequent need to redistribute wealth, (iii.) the opposition to capitalists rather than to capitalism, (iv.) the emphasis on the independence and self-reliance of the working class, and (v.) a national (rather than internationalist) perspective (Foote 1997, 9-12). Postwar Labour governments tried to satisfy the political demands resulting from this perspective by employing Keynesian macro-economic planning and introducing public ownership of key sectors of the economy. Both strategies contributed to the establishment of a new social group of managers that administered the nationalised sector of the economy. Hence, the Labour government acted in a paternalist way: rather than introducing forms of workers' self-management and control, it created a new class of supervisors. This followed the logic of labourism that socialism was not about class power and emancipation but about relative equality and increased security. Proponents of labourism were

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2   This pragmatic approach is generally identified as the difference between the British Labour Party and the social democratic parties of Continental Europe which originally took a Marxist position although they started modifying it from early on. Interestingly, the commitment to the socialisation of the means of production survived in the pragmatic Labour Party much longer than in the German Social Democratic Party.

convinced that working-class people were not interested in, and perhaps not even capable of, ruling over their own affairs.[3]

Once the foundations of the welfare state were firmly in place and working-class people started profiting from it in the 1950s, the so-called revisionists emerged as the most vocal group in the party. They contended that the welfare state had changed Britain's class structure and even more so the way the working class saw themselves and, consequently, had to be seen by others. The best-known summary of revisionist principles and assumptions was formulated by Tony Crosland. In *The Future of Socialism* (1956), he discussed the meaning of socialism in an affluent society and called for a shift from concentrating on the advancement of working-class people to focussing on the interests of future generations. Hence, social justice was no longer understood primarily as a class issue. A classless society had been created in the sense that the working class had become increasingly indistinguishable from the middle class. They enjoyed equal social status and became more suburban, individualistic, and consumption-oriented. Crosland interpreted this as a positive development to which Labour, however, had to adapt. People did no longer identify with the working-class movement. This, for him, was proven by the party's period in opposition after 1951 (Crosland 1956, 286). In 1959, Douglas Jay, another revisionist, similarly claimed that the party was in danger of fighting for a class that no longer existed (Panitch 1971, 188). The revisionists' new view of a more middle-class British society culminated in the call for the abolition of Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution – the passage demanding the socialisation of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, as well as popular, democratic administration and control of nationalised industries. Hugh Gaitskell, party leader from 1955 to 1963 and a committed revisionist, campaigned for a reformulation, which, however, the 1960 annual conference rejected, especially due to trade union opposition. This symbolic defeat notwithstanding, the early 1960s are seen as the heyday of revisionist hegemony, even though not everyone was happy with the assumed new situation – critics of working-class people supposedly emulating middle-class lifestyles included Richard Hoggart, who published his nostalgic view of the working-class culture of the 1930s and his criticism of the contemporary one in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). Similar to Hoggart, who deplored that the working class fell prey to consumer society, Christopher Rowland, a political scientist, advised the party in 1960: "The average Labour-inclined ITV-viewing voter has to be got at in the style to which he has become accustomed – simply, repetitively, irrationally" (1960, 351). Ralph Miliband sarcastically commented on the supposed dumbing-down effects of affluence: "Never had Labour leaders been so haunted by a composite image of the potential Labour voter as quintessentially petty-bourgeois and therefore liable to be frightened off by a radical alternative" (1961, 339). Left-wing critics of revisionism like Miliband, furthermore, emphasised two basic facts – that people still had to spend long

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3   To see the working class in this way has a long tradition and goes back to the party's earliest days. In a 1902 pamphlet with the title *Brains better than Bets or Beer*, John Burns, a Labour activist complained: "the curse of the working class is the fewness of their wants, the poverty of their desire" (qtd. in Black 2003, 26).

hours doing alienated work to earn a living and that capitalism was prone to frequent crises. Both issues became more visible in the later 1960s.

2.2 Perpetrators and Victims of Crisis

The late 1960s and 1970s were characterised by a struggle within the party between those who supported a revived labour movement in the context of relative economic decline (culminating in the stagflation phenomenon of the 1970s), and those who began to see this movement as an obstacle to economic modernisation. The 1960s Labour governments experimented with indicative planning to initiate economic innovation but had to deal with an increasingly reluctant labour force that produced a radical shop stewards' movement (that often side-lined official trade union leaderships) and record numbers of strikes. Workers demanded more involvement in economic decision-making in the public sector and compensation for rising inflation rates. Once more, they referred to one of the core principles of labourism and demanded continued acceptance of free collective bargaining[4] between employers and workers as a central element of working-class independence. Thus, with growing numbers in trade union membership, the Labour government felt forced to withdraw a white paper for regulating strike action in the late 1960s.

In the early 1970s, the struggle in the party seemed to be won by those who demanded "a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families," as the February 1974 election manifesto put it (Labour Party 1973, 13). This became operationalised in the so-called social contract which implemented corporatist structures[5] – the workers' representatives' in-volvement in decision-making, i.e. industrial democracy, in exchange for wage restraint (to come to grips with inflation). Additionally, the programme announced an expanded social wage: extensive spending on health, education, and welfare. This emancipatory approach accepting workers as co-organisers was most clearly pursued by the Department of Industry with Tony Benn at the helm in the mid-1970s. However, this did not last long, and the British government's turn to the IMF for financial help produced demands for wage restraint, plans for privatisation, and job redundancies in 1976. The social contract was replaced by austerity policies, and the Labour government entered a protracted period of conflict with militant workers that ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher.

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4   Free collective bargaining refers to the negotiations between employers and workers which traditionally were legally unregulated in Britain. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, trade unions defended this freedom against government attempts to create legal frameworks for the requirements and practices of strikes and other forms of industrial action. The Thatcher governments introduced such regulations in a series of legislative pieces over the 1980s.

5   Corporatism stands for a set of institutional arrangements that consensually coordinate economic policy via a 'tripartite' structure representing labour, business, and government. Corporatism was seen as a way out of the combined problems of economic stagnation and inflation in the 1970s – giving trade unions a voice in economic decision-making in exchange for wage restraint. Taking different forms in different countries, corporatist arrangements constituted attempts at dealing with the crises of the Keynesian welfare states.

In the 1980s, the struggle in the party continued. The early 1980s saw a new commitment to the 'irreversible shift of power and wealth' towards workers which led to the formulation of the Alternative Economic Strategy. This echoed the social contract but put less emphasis on the nationalisation of the economy and instead more on extended integration of workers into decision-making (Labour Party 1983, 2). Ideas of grassroots democracy had gained strength with a new generation of anti-Thatcherite activists flocking into Labour. After the defeat in the 1983 election at the latest, however, these forces started losing the battle in the party. A new leadership under Neil Kinnock embraced a 'new realism' which distanced itself from the radical causes that were fought by many in the party at a local or regional level. It shows the leadership's goal to appear 'respectable' instead of 'radical' and to appeal to those sections of the population who did not seem to oppose Thatcher's neoliberal reforms (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, 37; Shaw 1994, 34).

Kinnock's criticism of the miners' strike mentioned in the introduction has to be seen in this context. One year later, at the party's 1985 annual conference and after the miners' defeat, Kinnock condemned radical-left Liverpool city councillors (many of whom had working-class backgrounds) who had passed an illegal budget to defend the local working-class population in one of Britain's poorest cities against government cuts.[6] It shows Kinnock's intention to recreate the party's labourist image as that of a party caring for the people but not fighting the class struggle against the government:

> I shall tell you again what you know. Because you are from the people, because you are of the people, because you live with the same realities as everybody else lives with, implausible promises don't win victories. I'll tell you what happens with impossible promises. You start with far-fetched resolutions. They are then pickled into a rigid dogma, a code, and you go through the years sticking to that, outdated, misplaced, irrelevant to the real needs, and you end up in the grotesque chaos of a Labour council hiring taxis to scuttle round a city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers. […] you can't play politics with people's jobs and with people's services or with their homes. (Kinnock 1985)

This did not address Liverpool alone but the so-called hard left in the party and beyond. Kinnock's position takes sides with working-class people as victims of the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s. However, he criticises those claiming to pursue radical working-class politics as perpetrators, complicit in exacerbating these crises.

Over the next years, the party also revised its previously uncompromising positions on the Thatcher government's industrial relations legislation and on European Community membership and distanced itself from the poll tax protests. In the course

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6   Struggles by left-wing local councils with superordinate political institutions have a long tradition in the Labour Party. The archetypal example is *Poplarism* in the early 1920s, when the local councillors of Poplar, led by the later leader of the Labour Party, George Lansbury, went to jail for passing an illegal budget in order to campaign for rate equalisation (i.e. for the redistribution of local tax money between the wealthier London boroughs and the poorer ones). Similar conflicts occurred in West Ham (London) and Chester-le-Street (County Durham), as well as later in Clay Cross (Derbyshire). For more information see Lansley, Goss, and Wolmar (1989), and Lavalette (2006).

of this reorientation, the population, including potential working-class voters, was more and more often addressed as customers and consumers, and the party spoke in more positive terms about the spaces in which consumers meet: in markets.

2.3 Part of an 'Organic Community'

In other words, Kinnock and the people around him paved the way for Blairism within the party. Under Tony Blair's leadership New Labour accepted much of the Thatcherite settlement (for example, restrictive trade union and industrial relations legislation as well as privatisation) but added a communitarian dimension to stabilise it. Firstly, at the symbolic level, Blair succeeded in 1995 where Gaitskell had failed in 1960. A new Clause IV substituted the old. Instead of the nationalisation of the means of production, it called for "power, wealth and opportunity […] in the hands of the many not the few" (Labour Party 2020, 3). Secondly, Blair was thoroughly convinced that consumer culture had replaced producer culture. Hence, people were consumers and customers first, not members of a class. His close collaborator Peter Mandelson urged the party to move away from the image of representing the "blue-collar, working-class, northern, horny-handed, dirty-overalled people" (qtd. in Avril 2019, 106).[7] Nevertheless, New Labour differed from Thatcherite Conservatism in so far as it saw individuals not exclusively as consumers. Instead, it embraced a view of society that some might call mildly social democratic, but which could be more aptly defined as communitarian.[8] Blair's companion, competitor, and successor Gordon Brown explained the communitarian perspective, stating that "[p]eople do not live in isolation. People do not live in markets. People live in communities. I think of Britain as a community of citizens with common needs, mutual interests, shared objectives, related goals and most of all linked destinies" (qtd. in Foote 1997, 343). This amounted to an organicist rather than a class-based view of society which, according to Blair, nevertheless included a version of socialism: "It is, if you will, social-ism [*sic*]. It contains an ethical and subjective judgment that individuals owe a duty to one another and to a broader society – the left view of citizenship" (qtd. in Foote 1997, 346). Combined with a positive view of 'the market,' this perspective could be called "neoliberalism with a Christian-socialist face," as sociologist Bob Jessop suggested at the time (2003, 2).

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7   Oddly enough, he was shortly afterwards helicoptered into Hartlepool as Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, one of the working-class constituencies par excellence, and became its MP.

8   At the time, there were controversial debates on the character of the New Labour Project as labourist, social democratic, third-way, neoliberal, neo-revisionist, etc. For overviews see Driver and Martell (2002); Coates (2005); several contributions to Berg and Kaiser (2006). Communitarianism here stands for an understanding of a social formation neither reducible to the sum of its individuals nor characterised by fundamental conflict. Instead, it sees society as a community of people who negotiate and accept social obligations to each other. It becomes the task of politics to coordinate and protect this ethical solidarity. For a short discussion of communitarianism see Buckler (2002, 188-189); for a comprehensive elaboration see Etzioni (1993).

New Labour dismissed all antagonistic interests, including any notion of class conflict. In his last speech as party leader at an annual conference, Blair repeated in 2006: "The core vote of this party today is not the heartlands, the inner city, not any sectional interest or lobby. Our core vote is the country" (qtd. in Beech 2019, 69). There were a couple of problems with this communitarian perspective. Like the revisionists' ideas, it relied on continuous economic growth. As early as 1997, Foote correctly criticised that New Labour lacked any clear strategy for dealing with the effects of a globalised economy (as well as multinational capital). Blair stepped down just in time to avoid the banking crisis that began to unfold in 2007. His successor did not find an answer to it and ruined his reputation for economic competence in record time. Interestingly, in a recent reflection, Margaret Hodge, a central New Labour figure, conceded that New Labour's most serious mistake had been not to argue for tax rises – in other words, for redistribution and more generous spending on vital public services (2019, 203-204). Quite to the contrary, perhaps the worst aspect of domestic policy under New Labour was to blame the poor for being poor. While even Douglas Jay, one of the theorists of 1960s revisionism, had admitted that "one of the chief reasons why the poor are very poor is that the rich are very rich" (qtd. in Foote 1997, 194-195), New Labour had embraced what Ruth Levitas called "MUD" – the moral underclass discourse popular among neoconservatives in the 1990s (1998, 7-8). This explains New Labour's authoritarian tendencies from workfare initiatives to anti-social behaviour orders.

2.4 Victims of Austerity

After the end of the New Labour era, the party felt it had to win back working-class support. This was no doubt accurate. While 60 per cent of the DE groups of the official British class system had voted for Labour in 1997, the number was down to 40 per cent in 2010. In the C2 group, it had declined from 50 to 30 per cent (Beech 2019, 72).[9] The party started talking about class again. This renewed interest in working-class people and working-class concerns came in two varieties: the first, 'blue Labour,' associated with a group of people around academic Maurice Glasman, aimed at addressing the problems of poor working-class communities, especially in the North of England. Key issues were migration, especially from within the EU in times of rising unemployment figures, and the disastrous consequences of austerity policies for those who relied most strongly on public sector support. With Ed Miliband elected as new leader in 2010 and trying to strike a balance between New and Old (and 'blue') Labour, the party returned to its traditional core themes: poverty and inequality. This still had a communitarian dimension – journalists sarcastically reported they had counted more than 50 occurrences of the word "together" in Ed Miliband's speech at the 2014 annual conference (Freedland 2014).

Secondly, a left reformist and communitarian approach played a prominent role in the Corbyn years too. If one looks beyond the ferocious media attacks on Jeremy

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9   These letters refer to the standard model of stratification of British society, originally developed by the National Readership Survey. The C2 group consists of skilled workers, D and E include semi- and unskilled workers as well as economically inactive people.

Corbyn as a person, one finds quite a number of perspectives close to traditional labourism and even some New Labour elements. This might be the reason why veteran political scientists described Labour's 2017 election manifesto as a pale reflection of the Alternative Economic Strategy of the early 1980s (Gamble, 2015) or as disappointingly moderate (Leys 2018, 359). Allen and Bara (2021), however, observe a further move to the left in the 2019 manifesto, with its stronger focus on equality, welfare state expansion, market regulation, and a green new deal. In any case, a new interest in workers and in the role they should have in the organisation of the production process was obvious. John McDonnell, then shadow chancellor, clarified this at the 2015 annual conference:

> A strategic state works in partnership with business, entrepreneurs and workers to stimulate growth. […] A successful and fair economy cannot be created without the full involvement of its workforce. That's why restoring trade union rights and extending them to ensure workers are involved in determining the future of their companies is critical to securing the skills development and innovation to compete in a globalised economy. We will promote modern alternative public, co-operative, worker-controlled and genuinely mutual forms of ownership. (qtd. in Watt 2015)[10]

Corbyn himself emphasised new forms of democratic public ownership, too, and identified them as a precondition for a Britain caring "for the many, not the few" – the wording he adopted from Blair's Clause IV. The Corbyn project tried to address two working classes simultaneously – the networked, individualised young white-collar workers, those that the Great British Class Survey of 2011 called the "emergent service workers," and that survey's traditional blue-collar working class (Savage et al. 2013, 230), or, in the terms proposed by Jon Cruddas and his team, the "pioneers" and "settlers" respectively (Cruddas, Pecorelli, and Rutherford 2016, 12). It was perhaps Corbyn's biggest achievement to bring these together relatively successfully in the 2017 election without embracing anti-immigration rhetoric, stressing the basis of social policy demands instead. This success could not be repeated two years later when Brexit was presented as a panacea for all problems under the slogan of 'taking back control.' In a listening exercise with party activists by two sitting MPs and a former one in the aftermath of the 2019 election defeat, a Labour member from Stoke-on-Trent explained: "Brexit focused the problem, but there is a deeper one as the Labour Party has been losing the working class for a long time. Take back control wasn't about taking power back from Brussels but to get power back as it was in the 70s" (qtd. in Lavery, Smith, and Trickett 2020, 8). It is tragic and paradoxical that the very party that had annihilated the settlement associated with the 1970s – the welfare state which seemed to give people 'power' over their own lives – was now entrusted with reviving it while the party that seriously tried to leave the neoliberal paradigm behind, ended with a disastrous result.

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10 This statement combines many of Labour's former positions: corporatism, workers and democratic control and ownership of the economy, and the need to survive in a globalised economy. It obviously tried to build bridges to all wings of the party primarily to mollify hostility towards Corbyn from the centre and the right.

Under Keir Starmer, Labour seems to have embraced a public-values based approach, as it was recommended by his chief-advisor, Claire Ainsley (2018, 6). This approach avoids concepts such as class antagonism, equality, and socialism, and instead addresses a wide variety of values from justice and opportunity (for everyone) to loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Goes 2021, 179-181). According to Eunice Goes, this comes with a patriotic slant and aims at regaining the votes of the 'settlers' in the former 'red wall' constituencies, while the support of a sufficient number of 'pioneers' is taken for granted (2021, 178).

3. Cultural Political Economy and the Discourse on Class

Marxist class theory distinguishes class as an objective material reality from class as a subjective lived reality – class in itself versus class for itself, the latter also known as class consciousness. What has been the Labour Party's role in producing and re-producing such a consciousness since 1945?

Many scholars in mainstream political science argue that political parties simply aggregate views and opinions they find in society. Electoral competition is about doing this more effectively than the opponents, and electoral success, the goal of political parties' activity, rewards the one that does it best. Others suggest that political parties shape views and opinions. They are actors in the production of political cultures – understood as ensembles of ideas about how the economy, politics, and society should work (Leeper and Slothuus 2014, 133-135). They are involved in producing what cultural political economy (CPE) calls imaginaries. They do so, however, under conditions partly beyond their own choice.

Broadly speaking, the CPE approach is a culturally enriched modification of regulation theory. Starting out from the observation that capitalist economies are crisis-prone and doomed to fail if left alone, regulation theory claims that states organise processes of regulation and regularisation, and thus provide long phases of stability for specific accumulation processes in capitalist societies (Aglietta 2015; Husson 2009; Jessop and Sum 2006). Cultural political economy studies both the institutional but also the semiotic dimensions of such regulation processes to avoid 'soft,' purely culturalist, and 'hard,' exclusively institutionalist, explanations of changes in social formations – both of them reductionist (Jessop 2004, 171). Discursive regulation works through imaginaries.[11] Political actors popularise, and mobilise support for, specific economic imaginaries. Once they succeed, such imaginaries develop a performative function and have their effects on the material world. Over time, imaginaries and fitting institutions are naturalised. In these processes, semiotic and political orders are established that act as spatio-temporal fixes: economic strategies, state projects, and hegemonic visions that jointly stabilise capitalism in specific locations for a limited stretch of time. But according to Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, these naturalisations are never complete and without fissures. Since the capitalist economy does not work as a monolithic structure, it never functions without internal contradictions, mistakes, and ruptures, and despite all regulation, produces crises. A crisis is marked not by an

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11 The following explanation is based on Jessop (2004, 161-163).

economic problem as such (which frequently occurs) but by the contradiction between such a problem and the established operations of solving problems. Crises thus have the potential to denaturalise institutions and imaginaries. They are creative periods during which alternative imaginaries proliferate. The selection of new imaginaries becomes the object of power struggles – some imaginaries are retained, others are delegitimised. Over time, a new regulative imaginary is established and gains a hegemonic status.

Since social formations are complex, consisting of different subsystems, these power struggles over the selection of imaginaries take place at different places, among them organisations such as the Labour Party. This brings us back to Panitch's thesis of class struggle within the party and to the question whether the party identifies as its primary task to formulate and represent the class interests of those who are the victims of capitalist crisis, or to bring the economy back on track within the entrenched parameters of existing capitalism, a stance usually imagined and referred to as acting in the interest of everyone in society, regardless of their class affiliation. This article's overview shows that the latter dominated Labour Party discourse for most of the time: economic modernisation produced increasing levels of wealth which strengthened the working class in itself materially but weakened class consciousness culturally in the postwar period. The long crisis of British capitalism from the 1960s to the 1980s, however, let the Labour Party select from and develop a number of alternative imaginaries – the need to transform capitalism into socialism or at least a strictly regulated capitalism in the interests of working people and their families, but also the need to break certain forms of political militancy to allow the smooth trickle-down of wealth at the core of neoliberal imaginaries. Eventually, the latter became dominant. This was to some extent the result of the distribution of power within the party but also the effect of discursive struggles beyond in which powerful proponents of neoliberalism had popularised moral panics over working-class militancy. The banking crisis of 2007/2008, austerity, and the reluctant realisation that capitalism has reached its planetary limits have produced another crisis. The struggle over imaginaries is still going on, though the change from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer and the party's shrinking membership numbers both point towards the likely outcome, i.e., that Labour will take over the new imaginary popularised by the Conservatives once more. This time, it is the imaginary of a resilient, national, isolationist push to 'take back control' of capitalism. Inevitably, in this new context, working-class politics will again be imagined as anachronistic, and working-class consciousness and struggle as obstacles to parliamentary politics.

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