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Original Citation

Avis, James (2000) The forces of Conservatism: New Labour, the third way, reflexive modernisation and social justice. *Education and social justice*, 2 (3). pp. 31-38. ISSN 1464 2869

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The Forces of Conservatism: New Labour, the Third Way, Reflexive Modernisation and Social justice

James Avis

A thriving knowledge society must be cosmopolitan and open; it must reward talent and creativity; it must invest in people and education. The radical innovation and knowledge creation that underpins modern economic growth thrives in cultures that are democratic and dissenting; that are open to new ideas from unusual sources; in which authority and elites are constantly questioned and challenged. (Leadbeater, 1999, p1x)

Leadbeater epitomises the construction of a new economy predicated on the development of human and social capital in which creativity and talent is rewarded. Education and lifelong learning is to play a key role in these processes. The references to democracy and dissent articulate with concerns about social justice and inclusion. Underlying these ideas is the suggestion that we are living through a moment of economic transformation in which old assumption and relations are brought into question and are seen as no longer appropriate. Economic and social relations are being transformed and have to be re-thought to bring them into line with the 'new' reality. A number of notions have been used to make sense of these new condition amongst which we find the risk society and reflexive modernisation. There is an affinity between these notions and New Labour's third way. In this article I want to draw out the links between New Labour's third way, reflexive modernisation and social justice. In order to do this the article sets out briefly the socioeconomic and political context in which New Labour operates which is followed by a discussion of the third way and reflexive modernisation, drawing out the implications for social justice and education.

Socio-economic and political context

Here we meet with well rehearsed claims that link global economic relations with the need to enhance economic competitiveness through education and training. Such links are the foundation of the educational settlement that New Labour is attempting to construct. In many respects there is a continuity

with Conservative educational policies that similarly called for competitiveness as well as meritocratic versions of social democracy. In *Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* it states:

The Challenge we face to equip individuals, employers and the country to meet the demands of the 21st century is immense and immediate. In the information and knowledge based economy, investment in human capital – in the intellect and creativity of people – is replacing past patterns of investment in plant, machinery and physical labour. To continue to compete, we must equip ourselves for this new world with new and better skills. We must improve levels of knowledge and understanding and develop the adaptability to respond to change. (DfEE, 1999, p12)

Notions that call for the development of human and more recently social capital, are taken as self evidently the case with individual self development being thought to provide the basis for a more cohesive and inclusive society. Individual investment in developing human capital will result in requisite skill formation, whilst the development of social capital will facilitate high trust relations that underpin collaboration and thereby sustain the forms of network characteristic of the new economy (see Leadbeater, 1999, p11). In this vision education becomes the key to societal, economic, and personal sustainability. It is through education that competitiveness can be enhanced and societal as well as individual well-being secured. Whilst these assumed relations are taken as self-evidently true they are deeply problematic. For example, Hughes and Tight (1998) note, drawing upon the work of Shackleton (1992):

There is little evidence to support the view that the total quantity of training is closely correlated to a country's economic performance and ... there is no necessary connection between stocks of skilled labour and productivity (Hughes and Tight 1998, p184 citing Shackleton)

Ewart Keep (1997) similarly raises serious questions about arguments that view human capital as being the key mechanism used to enhance competitiveness and argues that there is no overwhelming evidence to support the contention that:

the rules of international competition have undergone a paradigm shift, and that knowledge and skills now represent the sole sustainable source of competitive advantage (Keep, 1997, p460)

For Keep changes in training become but one piece amongst a set of strategies that can lead to improved competitiveness. In his discussion of core competencies he argues that the way in which these are distributed within an organisation are subject to an institution/managerial logic as well as being shaped by struggles surrounding waged labour and may just as easily lead to de-skilling, up-skilling or re-skilling. The point is there is no singular direction which is necessarily pursued to deliver global competitiveness.

Underpinning moves towards third way politics and notions of reflexive modernisation lies a new economic realism. This realism takes for granted globalisation and the economic imperative to develop competitiveness; gone in all this is a recognition of the way in which state practices construct these notions. Thompson criticises the passive modernisation of New Labour which sees itself as ‘... working with the tide of social change’ (Thompson, 2000, p3). This realism leads to a particular understanding of the role of the state. The state becomes a facilitator of competitiveness and the employability of its people which in turn generates a particular understanding of the state in relation to education. The state sets the terrain on which education operates, it regulates the education system and through the use of targets and performance indicators ensures rising standards, however defined. It also ensures a close relations between the perceived needs of the new economy and educational ‘outputs’. Various notions have been used to describe this nexus between the state and education: steering at a distance, midwife state, contracting state, competitive state and so on. What these ideas share is a common understanding that the state should secure the conditions required for competitiveness in a global economy. Michael Rustin writes in relation to New Labour:

The fundamental assumption of the Blair project is that unless Britain can reach the standard of performance of its global competitors, in virtually every aspect of life, there is no hope of achieving lasting improvements in well-being. ‘Getting competitive is the name of the game’. (Rustin, 1998, p7)

The concern with competitiveness is by no means novel but what is new is the emphasis placed upon globalisation as well as the suggestion that we have or are passing through an epochal transformation. Again a range of notions are used to describe this transformation and are encapsulated in post-modernism, reflexive modernity, the risk society and post-fordism (see Avis, 2000; Hill, *et al*, 1999). All these ideas share a common understanding of the transformation in economic and social relations. They are in part an attempt to make sense of the new conditions in which we find ourselves whilst at the same time attempting ideologically to reconcile us to the apparently new social and economic conditions in which we are located. It is at this juncture that the neo-liberal values that underpin this ‘new economy’ become apparent. The new economy carries a construction of subjectivity that invests in its continuous self development, rendering the individual more employable and adaptable to the current economic context. A globally competitive economy requires the development of a self-disciplining subject which renders itself more employable by investing in its own social and human capital. Paradoxically, it is claimed that the development of high trust collaborative relations together with the enhancement of skills will shape individuals who can then find their place within a globally competitive economy. Not only will educational processes generate a competitive economy, but through investing in education the individual will become more competitive in the labour market. In this paper I want to concentrate on reflexive modernisation and the risk society as I see an affinity between these ideas and third way politics.

Reflexive Modernisation

...[The first] modernity based on nation-state societies, where social relations, networks and communities are essentially understood in a territorial sense. The collective patterns of life, progress and controllability, full employment and exploitation of nature that were typical of this first modernity have now been undermined by five interlinked processes: globalisation, individualisation, gender revolution, underemployment and global risks...

If the five processes are considered more closely, it becomes clear what they have in common: namely, they are all unforeseen consequences of the victory of the first, simple, linear, industrial modernisation based on the national state. This is what I mean by talking of ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Beck, 1999, p1-2)

Or as Giddens has put it:

Simple modernisation is old-type unilinear modernisation; reflexive modernisation, by contrast, implies coming to terms with the limits and contradictions of the modern order. (Giddens, 1998 p31)

For both Beck and Giddens the first or simple modernity has run its course and we have now moved towards reflexive modernisation which carries with it a transformation of earlier relations. The first modernity was characterised by industrialisation as well as at its apogee, the development of the Keynesian welfare state which promised full employment and a variety of supportive social structures, the national health service, social and housing benefits and so on – all of which have been undermined by globalisation. This period was also characterised by mass production and consumption which enabled ‘full’ employment in semi and unskilled manufacturing occupations – Fordist economic relations. These relations have similarly been undermined by globalisation and the response, as in the competitiveness discourse, has been the call for the development of post-Fordist work relations that utilise high skill and high trust relations to produce value added products (see Avis, 1993). There are three points to be made here. Firstly, a neo-liberal construction of globalisation is taken for granted, which constructs a world market economy demanding competitiveness at an individual and national level. Secondly, globalisation is construed as an economic fact of life to which national governments must respond or face secular economic, social and political decline. Thirdly, the very successes of the first modernity are construed as undermining its long term viability as a political strategy.

The alleged move towards reflexive modernisation and the risk society provides a context in which a new political and economic context is forged. Previous sureties have given way to questioning uncertainty and the challenging of old orthodoxies. For example, within the first modernity scientific progress was taken for granted as was the ‘truthfulness’ of expert knowledge. This is no longer the case as is evidenced in the controversy surrounding genetically modified foods, or earlier with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. Beck (1992) in a similar vein has talked of the risk society characterised by manufactured uncertainty, itself a consequence of the success of the first modernity. Manufactured uncertainty with its attendant risks undermines expert and scientific knowledge and requires a democratic and dialogic politics. Experts have lost their authoritative status and the way in which this loss can be resolved is through debate located within a democratic politics. The outcome of this democratic process will determine the resulting strategy, and in a

sense, risk will be democratised. This provides a basis for a reflexive modernity which examines self critically the potential consequences of its actions Giddens and Beck both write about reflexive modernisation and note the condition of radical insecurity in which we currently find ourselves. Giddens (1994, 1998) for example has discussed the shift beyond simple dichotomies of left and right. The political landscape, it is claimed, has been redrawn whereby policies formerly associated with the right have been adopted and re-shaped by the left. This can be seen in the appropriation of *Welfare to Work* in Labours *New Deal* as well as in the concern with ‘what works’ as opposed to ideological correctness (see for example, Levitas, 1999; Rose, 1999). Not only is it argued that we have moved beyond notions of left and right but that the dualities characterising the politics of the first modernity have been transcended. For example those between: private and public ownership; capital and labour and that class and political identities have become fragmented with the old antagonisms becoming marginalised. It is claimed there is no longer a place for the old shibboleths of social democracy. For example, private education providers will be as capable of delivering educational quality as public providers and in some instances will be markedly better. David Blunkett in calling for the extension of educational diversity and the establishment of City Academies notes:

The City Academies will be part of a wider programme to extend diversity within the publicly-provided sector and raise standards where existing provision is inadequate. This will involve building on the existing Fresh Start programme in three ways:

- allowing new schools to be established within the publicly-provided sector..
- allowing existing private schools to become part of the publicly provided education sector..
- allowing new promoters from the voluntary, religious or business sectors to take over weak schools or replace them with City Academies (Blunkett, 2000, p21-22)

These kinds of argument pick up and run with the new right critique of social democracy which has been incorporated into New Labour’s repertoire. We confront in part a parody of the past in which social democracy is straight forwardly associated with radical and socialist politics. We also confront the strictures of the ‘new’ economy which, whilst aggressively capitalist, imply that class antagonisms are a thing of the past. Beck refers to ‘capitalism without classes’, but even here he is involved in a sleight of hand (Beck and Rutherford, 1999, p19).

Individualisation has undermined the collective basis of class formation. The traditional working class with its collective culture, identity and life chances has become fragmented and with this the collective and class basis of political allegiances has been undermined. This may be the case, but rather than being evidence of capitalism without class it merely reflects the re-organisation of class formation in a neo-liberal context in which social antagonism has been deepened. Callinicos citing Bourdieu (1998a,b) writes:

‘the *detritorialisation of the enterprise*’ now freed from any specific attachment to region and nation – has ensured that ‘insecurity is everywhere today’; ‘[o]bjective insecurity supports a generalised subjective insecurity which today affects, at the heart of an advanced economy, the majority of workers and even those who are not yet directly hit.’ Indeed, this is part of ‘a mode of domination of a new type, based on the institution of a generalised and permanent condition of insecurity aiming to compel the workers to submission, to the acceptance of exploitation’. (Callinicos 1999 p89)

Beck recognises these and similar processes:

‘Flexibility’ is demanded everywhere – or, in other words, an ‘employer’ should be able to fire ‘employees’ more easily. ‘Flexibility’ also means a redistribution of risks from state and economy to individuals.’ (Beck, 1999a, p12)

However, these processes are seen as facets of individualisation rather than as the individualisation of class relations that demand the re-assertion of a class, if not socialist, politics.

Nevertheless the arguments of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1994, 1998) are important in that they are thought to herald progressive possibilities through their concern with:

- democracy,
- personal empowerment and
- sensitivity to ecological and global issues.

It is the uncertainties and insecurities of the future that contain the possibility of a democratic politics. The unintended consequences of scientific and technological processes have created the ‘risk society’ and provide the basis for moves towards greater democracy and dialogue, as does the problematic nature of any form of expertise or authority. The move towards reflexive modernisation provides a link between these ideas and the construction of New Labour’s third way which also has an affinity with post-Fordist notions and globalisation. These ideas are important in that they serve as ideological supports

for New Labour and the construction of its ‘third way’ and as such attempt to radically re-shape the socialist project. These New Labour arguments re-figure the socialist project in a manner that takes for granted market and capitalist relations leading to a call for a third way politics that can transcend traditional political dichotomies.

Giddens comments:

‘third way’ refers to a framework of thinking and policy making that seeks to adapt social democracy to a world which has changed fundamentally over the past two or three decades. It is a third way in the sense that it is an attempt to transcend both old style social democracy and neoliberalism. (Giddens, 1998, p26)

But, at the same time these arguments call for and herald more responsible and democratic control of public/private organisations. These ideas rest with a particular political project – Blairism, and the way in which this operates in continuity with Thatcherism, taking market and capitalist relations as given. However, Blairism attempts to soften the impact of Thatcherite neo-liberalism through the call for social inclusion and cohesion whilst at the same time modernising the social formation in a way in which individualism and self-responsibility is writ large.

The uncertainties born of globalisation that face the social formation require individuals to be flexible, to develop a sense of their own life projects and to accept responsibility for their future and that of their dependants. It is at this juncture that notions of rights and responsibilities come into play – the formation of a new moral economy aiming to shape subjectivity in alignment with the new economic realism.

And so to Values

the battle between capitalism and socialism in anything like the terms my grandfather’s generation would have understood it, is dead and buried. But the idea of values, of collective purpose and therefore community or collective action – of bonds of connection is not. It is being renewed. (Blair, 2000, p2)

The New Labour project whilst claiming an interest in social inclusion and cohesion operates within a consensual model of society which discounts social antagonism and exploitation at the site of waged labour. It is this silence that renders the project deeply conservative as it is concerned with the re-working of subjectivities to align these to the needs of a capitalist economy – the formation of a new moral economy (Ball, 1997). Rhetorically the ‘New economy’ is constructed as having transcended older class antagonism. In such an economy the individual has a

duty to invest in their own development. We are constructed as individuals who work with others to develop society/economy for the good of all. Social and cultural capital become intertwined and are held in place by individualism and the imperative of responsibility. For Giddens equal opportunity becomes re-written in an individualised form which uses the language of rights and responsibilities. Here we meet with an echo of the New Right's 'perverse incentives' whereby welfare benefits encourage the formation of dependency cultures. These become re-written as moral hazards. Giddens writes:

redistribution must not disappear from the agenda of social democracy. But recent discussion has... shifted the emphasis towards the 'redistribution of possibilities'. The cultivation of human potential should as far as possible replace after the event 'redistribution'. (Giddens, 1998, p100-101)

Such arguments sit nicely with notions of rights and responsibilities. Tony Blair commenting on the new economy suggests:

At the heart of the public policy towards the new economy is the idea that helping people in the new economy is not about protection but empowerment. An economy based on knowledge is one where people are the greatest natural resources. The old left idea of equality in the sense of uniform outcome or income is replaced by the notion of equal worth. Each person has value; has potential; our common task is to develop it. (Blair, 2000, p5-6)

For Blair the new economy draws together neo-liberal notions of the market which are held in check by social democratic commitments to social justice (Blair, 2000, p9). These commitments embody values of community and self development. It is incumbent upon the individual to develop themselves for the good of their family, the community and nation (Brown, 2000; Johnson, 2000). To stand against this logic is to be a 'force for conservatism' and to be out of kilter with the needs of the social formation in the new millennium.

Concluding issues education and social justice

The preceding argument raises contradictions which have created spaces for a progressive politics, e.g. social justice which is set in a subordinate position to the economy. This draws attention both to the lived experience of those in the labour market and the rhetoric surrounding the new economy. The construction of economic relations shaped through consensus is contradicted by the democratic and rights based rhetoric surrounding work which can be set against the lived experience of the employed.

Education is a prime example of these contradictions whereby job insecurity and authoritarianism is part of many teachers/'lecturers' lived experience (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998). The democratisation suggested by the risk society and reflexive modernisation is hardly present but can be used as a political resource to challenge existing relations.

Possibilities do arise for alternative and progressive outcomes as a result of these contradictions. Notions such as reflexive modernisation can support of the development of social justice, whilst the material conditions that call forth the 'knowledge worker' can be used to develop more democratic work relations. The calls for social justice and inclusion can be turned back on themselves and used to develop social forms and practices that are not predicated on employability. The importance of domestic labour is a point in case as is access to a social wage enabling active participation in the wider community (see for example, Giddens, 1998; Vandembroucke, 1998) An education system centred on notions of employability and competitiveness needs to interrogate these concepts. The pursuit of both needs to be unpacked and deconstructed. Paradoxically such a strategy is part of the claimed logic of reflexive modernisation which draws upon Beck and Giddens' interests in ecological, global and democratic processes. Such concerns are a necessary part of education. The move towards individualisation and self responsibility needs to be examined as part of a moral economy concerned with shaping subjectivity in alignment with the 'new' economic conditions. Education programmes that restrict themselves to the logic of employability will undermine any deep commitment to social justice. Hughes and Tight (1998) as well as Keep (1997) have argued that the presumption that the labour market requires highly skilled labour is deeply problematic. An education system that refuses to engage with this will be cultivating a thoroughly conservative process in which learners will be encouraged to introject self blame for what is after all a labour market failure. Interest in softer key skills involved with problem solving and team work can be seen as an attempt to forge learner subjectivity (see for example, Ainley, 1994). Leadbeater would claim educational processes are pivotal in forming dissenting cultures which generate radical innovation in knowledge and secure economic growth:

The radical innovation and knowledge creation that underpins modern economic growth thrives in cultures that are democratic and dissenting; that are open to new ideas from unusual sources; in which authority and elites are constantly questioned and challenged. (Leadbeater, 1999, p1x)

However, such an educational project is severely undermined by the ready acceptance of market and capitalist relations. An educational project seeking to develop the critical and creative potential of students will uncover the contradictions surrounding reflexive modernisation as well as New Labour spurious consensual model of the social formation. Radical educational practices would result in the creation of 'really useful knowledge' as well as an engaged citizenship. It could be that education needs to become a 'force of conservatism' in that the radicalism of an earlier age needs to be reclaimed. It is not good enough to talk of capitalist modernisation or indeed of the varieties of capitalism, we need to move beyond these if we are to take seriously the pursuit of social justice, and as Levitas writes:

It may be countered that capitalism is the only game in town and there is no alternative: but humankind must sometimes set itself questions which it cannot immediately solve. (Levitas, 1999, p189)

Third way arguments and those associated with reflexive modernisation needs to be pushed to their limits. Concerns with democracy, creativity and critique need to be taken up in education together with a recognition of collectivity. The tendency towards individualisation and the stress placed upon self responsibility ignores the continuing importance of class and other structural relations. These latter relations need to be placed at the centre of educational processes as should the recognition of social antagonism. Educational processes that couch the development of employability in terms of technical and social skills refracted through the prism of social and cultural capital fail to recognise social antagonism. By ignoring the way in which structural processes are lived contradictorily through individualisation educational processes undermine a commitment to social justice. By recognising these themes a radicalised educational project becomes possible, one that is materially rooted in the changing economic and social context. ©

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