

## MEDIA, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

### **BBC Radio Four's *Analysis and the Third Way***

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#### **Abstract**

BBC Radio Four's current affairs programme, *Analysis* provided a platform for Third Way ideas in 1994 and 95. Key Third Way thinkers both contributed to and presented the programme which repeated many of the core Third Way ideas. This willingness to intervene in a key ideological shift mirrored the programme's enthusiastic treatment of neo-liberalism in the mid 1970s. Editions of the programme presented by the influential Thatcherite, John Vaisey provided an important space for the representation of neo-liberal ideas as they were beginning to influence the Conservative Party. Today there are early signs that *Analysis* is an important vehicle for the articulation of new ideas developing in the opposition Labour Party.

#### **Keywords**

radio current affairs; *Analysis*; Third Way; Thatcherism; Blue Labour; Geoff Mulgan

#### **Introduction**

Radio current affairs is a largely British phenomenon. Single issue in-depth current affairs radio programmes have been a distinctive feature of BBC output which can be traced back to the separation of the News and Talks departments in 1935 and the long-held belief that there was something risky about combining the two. The very term 'current affairs' is absent in American broadcasting terminology and although there is 'public affairs radio' in the US it has none of the self-conscious seriousness its British counterpart. Radio Four is the natural home of the genre and *Analysis* (since 1970) and *File on Four* (1977) are the main single subject current affairs programmes. *Analysis* must surely be the most cerebral of all BBC radio output and it reached the zenith of its seriousness and difficulty in the 1990s under the editorship of David Levy. The rigorous approach of the programme, and the demands it placed on its listeners, were no accident. This was a programme deliberately created, following the debacle of *Broadcasting in the Seventies*[i], to confirm the BBC's commitment to intellectually challenging content (Hendy, 1997; 63-6). Each week 45 minutes was devoted to a current affairs issue presented by a trusted broadcaster, only rarely a member of BBC staff (Mary Goldring in the 1970s and 80s and Frances Cairncross more recently were particularly prominent examples) and the contributors to programmes were often important in their field with regular appearances from senior politicians, academics, various experts and policy advisers.

The recent acquisition of all *Analysis* programmes (in audio form and as transcripts) from the late 1980s to 2003 has made it possible to study a particularly interesting period in the history of what is often seen as the BBC's 'flagship' current affairs programme.

## *Analysis*

In the 1990s *Analysis*, always a testing listen, became even more intellectually challenging to differentiate itself from other radio programmes which also addressed social and political issues. *File on Four* monopolised serious examination of social policy while the news magazine, *Today* provided more immediate news-related comment. The same 'boxing in' of current affairs is described by Georgina Born in her ethnographic account of television current affairs at the BBC (2004: 397). As television news became more analytical and documentary encroached on traditional current affairs territory, so programmes like *Panorama* lost their range and 'a sense of aimlessness prevailed'. (Born, 2004: 398) In radio however, the retreat into a rather more 'arcane' form of current affairs on *Analysis*, the 'All Souls of radio',<sup>[ii]</sup> created an opportunity to intervene decisively in the ideological changes occurring at the time and specifically the development of Third Way politics.

*Analysis*, freed by other programmes from the constraints of covering the details of social policy or from being over concerned with responding to immediate news stories turned towards the exclusive world of cerebral current affairs. This freedom of manoeuvre contrasted with the almost terminal decline of the television equivalent. The two main ITV current affairs programmes were both closed down; *This Week* in 1992 and *World in Action* in 1998 (Holland, 2006; Goddard et al, 2007). Meanwhile the BBC's *Panorama* was described by the *Daily Mirror* as 'Bullied, Beaten, Cowed' in the lead-up to the 1992 General Election (Lindley, 2002: 345-364). However, in the BBC under John Birt, although a climate of caution and fear prevailed in television current affairs, elsewhere, and especially in the expanding Documentaries department, there was remarkable freedom<sup>[iii]</sup> (2004: 397, 401). Radio was also surprisingly free from Birtist restrictions and radio current affairs ended the 1990s with very few casualties (and in the case of *File on Four* with a greatly enhanced reputation). No doubt the self-conscious seriousness of *Analysis* reflected Birt's own commitment to well researched and fully contextualised current affairs<sup>[iv]</sup> and this comparative freedom made it possible for radio current affairs to go where other genres and media dared not.

## **The Third Way**

Following Labour's surprising defeat in the 1992 General Election the seeds of what came to be known as 'New Labour' were sown and that variation of social democratic thought called the Third Way was finding fertile ground in academic circles and policy think tanks. After the end of soviet communism and the decline of the Left in Europe during the 1980s there was an attempt to reconcile free market ideas with social democratic principles. There was seen to be a third way 'beyond left and right' to borrow from the title of a foundational text on the subject (Giddens, 1994). Third Way thinkers, including the eminent British sociologist Anthony (now Lord) Giddens and the director of the left think tank, Demos, Geoff Mulgan, wanted to move beyond the orthodoxies of the left and right and develop a political ideology which *inter alia* stressed the impact of globalisation, the contradictions of the welfare state and radical accounts of the empowered, reflexive individual. The world of 'late modernity' required a new politics, even a 'life politics' in which the citizen could engage to respond to an increasingly high risk world. Both Giddens' *Beyond Left and Right* and Mulgan's *Politics in an Antipolitical Age* were published in 1994 and they made a significant contribution to Third Way thinking. Giddens provided a sophisticated critique of what he saw as the radicalism of the right and the

conservatism of the left. He argued for a fundamental rethink of the welfare state which needed to be 'empowering rather than merely "dispensed".' (2004: 18) Employing a variety of sociological ideas, Giddens incorporated patriarchy, reflexivity, risk and globalisation in his most political work to date. Mulgan also saw a crisis on the left and stressed the defining influence of globalisation in the what he called the era of 'high modernism'. (2004: 1) Although not an academic, Mulgan argued that developments in the social sciences and elsewhere were the potential, if underused, source of new thinking: 'there has been little borrowing from the extraordinary explosion of ideas around ecology and biology, the study of organizations and anthropology, the new sciences of complexity or religious ideas about responsibility'. (2004: 4) Like Giddens, Mulgan was not afraid to borrow ideas from the right, including the critique of welfare dependency and claims of the erosion of social class influence.[v] Also like Giddens he saw the challenges of the 'risk society' as ones which the knowing, responsible individual had to address. Both men challenged the orthodox commitment to economic growth and were prepared to wonder if alternative forms of development might make people more contented.

In 1995 there were 29 editions of *Analysis* and a number of these had titles which at least resonated with the Third Way agenda; 'The End of Enlightenment', 'the Pursuit of Happiness', 'Thinking Ahead' 'Obsolete signposts', 'A New Kind of democrat' and 'The End of Everything' all suggested content which would reflect Third Way concerns. Giddens himself was a contributor to two editions of the programme and, most significantly, Geoff Mulgan was the presenter of four and contributed to two others. The role of presenter was highly influential on *Analysis*; a respected public figure, often with academic credentials and broadcasting experience, introduced the pre-recorded contributions of various speakers and linked them together before concluding with a final assessment. Throughout its existence, *Analysis* provided a platform for its presenters to build an argument using the views of contributors in a style which could be seen as a radio essay. The presenter's linking comments and, importantly, introduction and conclusion framed those contributions to stamp their authorial voice on the programme. As a result the use of Mulgan, a central figure in the development of the Third Way in Britain, to present editions of *Analysis* meant that in those editions of the programme the Third Way agenda and concerns were particularly apparent.

In 'The End of Enlightenment' (26 January 1995) presented by the journalist and political commentator, Peter Kellner the contributors included Giddens and the Marxist social theorist, David Harvey. Kellner's introduction began with a familiar Third Way observation, 'Our starting point is the commonplace observation that life today is not as good as it should be, and can't be guaranteed to get any better'. Giddens commented that we used to think that the application of science and technology to our lives would improve them but, 'we all have to take decisions among a diversity of alternatives and this is a source of many uncertainties as well as benefits for us'. This edition of the programme reflected the postmodernist trend in intellectual thought which shared many of the Third Way ideas. Harvey in particular (author of the influential *The Condition of Postmodernity*) questioned orthodox ideas of rationality and progress in favour of the sort of radical uncertainty associated with both postmodernism and the Third Way. The overall theme of this edition of *Analysis* was that we live in an age of uncertainty, in, to use Giddens' expression, a 'runaway world' where familiar ideas of science and progress must be questioned.

A similar theme is found in 'The Human Factor' (16 March 1995) presented by Denys Blakeway. Once again ideas of uncertainty and unpredictability were prominent but this time the presenter stressed the role of the social sciences in finding solutions, 'if politicians were more open to the findings of research and more willing to accept complexity in human affairs, would

their new insights be of any help?’ He proceeded to say that research was helping us to understand the ‘causes of crime [...] psychologists are agreed that the roots of behaviour lie deep within the psyche..’ This readiness to call on the social sciences for policy direction was a feature of the Third Way and reflected by *Analysis* in its choice of contributors in 1995. In his conclusion, Blakeway wondered, in the language of the Third Way, ‘If the old left-right distinctions of culture and nature have broken down, it’s in part because the left no longer believe it’s possible to change society’.

The first of the four editions of *Analysis* presented by Geoff Mulgan was ‘The Pursuit of Happiness’ (23 March 1995). He started by questioning the relationship between growth and happiness and asked rhetorically how increased affluence affected the environment. He wondered if we take it for granted that growth is a good thing: ‘the evidence calls this into question’. He then adopted a clear position stating, ‘So however difficult it may be, it’s not only desirable but also politically possible to impose some constraints on growth’. In his conclusion, Mulgan combined two Third Way themes, the nature of happiness or well-being and political apathy,

...unless politicians do learn to pay attention to the subtler sources of wellbeing, like people’s sense of security, their available free time, or attractive public spaces, they should not be surprised if the feel-good factor continues to elude them and voters remain sullen and alienated.

In the second *Analysis* presented by Mulgan, ‘Thinking Ahead’ (25 May 1995) of the 12 contributors, five were academics and all of these were social scientists. This edition dealt with the ‘battle for ideas’ two years ahead of the General Election. A theme of this edition was the ferment of new ideas and thinking; the LSE Director, Ralph Dahrendorf talked about London as the ‘most fertile marketplace for ideas in Europe’. Mulgan supported the idea of an intellectual renaissance which he saw as the product of uncertainty, ‘Britain’s palpable unease about values and the legitimacy of institutions has set off an avalanche of new thinking, on everything from constitutional reform to welfare or the re-invention of government’. This was followed by a conventional Third Way statement, ‘The parties sense that the habitats for both radical Thatcherism and Clause 4 socialism have disappeared, but none is sure quite how to read the direction of change’. What followed was nothing less than a rallying cry to the Third way, a polemical statement of Third way of orthodoxy:

...for most of the last century, the frameworks came from the great ideologies of Left and Right, which were tied to organised interests groups and intellectually structured around economic arguments about planning or markets. But today these old ideologies are no longer doing the job (Geoff Mulgan).

‘Obsolete signposts’ (12 October 1995) continued the *Analysis* coverage of these themes with Anthony Giddens as a contributor, together with an influential (if temporary) Third Way supporter, David Marquand. The presenter, Maurice Fraser asked ‘Are you Left-wing, Right-wing, or in the political centre? Do these terms mean anything to you?’ he went on to inquire, ‘does the shorthand of Left and Right still tell us anything – or will it soon be as obsolete as state socialism and the Berlin Wall?’ Marquand’s comments reflected not only Third Way rhetoric but

language which came to be associated with the Labour leader, Tony Blair:

I think that the left have in a way, I won't say given up on the idea of redistribution but I think what is now becoming the dominant theme on the left is not so much redistribution as social inclusion'. [emphasis as in the transcript]

There was in Third Way thinking an interest in radical individualistic politics of the self, a feminist inspired sense of the personal as political and as the vehicle for social change. As the formal political process was increasingly discredited so 'life politics' and the world of political protest, alternative cultures, therapies and the greater recognition of diversity all had risen in importance. This narrative was clearly articulated in one of the most important Third Way inflected editions of *Analysis*, 'Legitimate Concerns' (26 October 1995) presented by Geoff Mulgan. He began with some uninhibited Third Way rhetoric, 'Worn out, out of touch, irrelevant. This is how many have come to see politics over the last few years, as throughout the western world the public seems to have lost its faith in government's ability to make their lives better'. One of the contributors was the radical American social theorist, Francis Fukuyama who was sceptical about the state's ability to solve social problems, 'ambitious social engineering has counterproductive effects that nobody anticipated'. Mulgan then introduced the personal dimension, the individual with the potential to provide solutions, 'It is this world of relationships with neighbours and friends, lovers, teachers and employers, which is now absorbing people's aspirations and energies.' For Mulgan there was in 'the rich and diverse mosaic of individual interests and groups' a democratic potential and he used the programme to argue for democratic reform which might include citizens juries and 'deliberative polls'.

It was the destiny of Third Way politics to underpin the policies of Tony Blair, elected leader of the Labour Party in July 1994. Although not a purist Third Way thinker in the mould of Giddens and Mulgan, in his *New Britain: my vision for a new country* (1996) Blair reproduced much of the Third Way rhetoric (the failure of the welfare state; the need to go beyond the battles of left and right) but with a more populist and morally explicit tone. An edition of *Analysis* presented by the journalist, John Kampfner, 'Fairly Modern?' (14 December 1995) included Blair as a contributor and Perri 6 (sic) who, like Mulgan, was a leading figure in Demos. The programme examined the relationship between politics and morality. Blair referred to 'New Labour' and argued that the whole point of it was to reconnect the Labour Party with a moral vision. He outlined the 'core vision' of New Labour including equipping people to succeed in global markets and the importance of education, infrastructure and technology to achieve that success. He articulated his social vision in which social cohesion was the product of rights and responsibilities working together. A new type of citizenship was needed where people would benefit from enhanced democratic rights, 'You can choose a different, a third way if you like, which is the government playing an enabling role.'

In 1996 the *Analysis* fascination with the Third Way seemed to end, perhaps because it was increasingly being discussed and reported elsewhere in the media. One exception was 'Security Alert' (27 June 1996) in which the academic Richard Cockett was the presenter. He started with these words, 'Are you feeling insecure, fearful of the future, worried about your economic prospects? Are you anxious about crime, rising divorce rates, and your fate in old age?'

Once again this was the Third Way rhetoric of risk and uncertainty and to answer this question there was a sociologist, a psychiatrist, a social historian and Helen Wilkinson of Demos who argued that changes in gender roles and especially a move away from traditional male identity would help people respond to risk.

## ***Analysis* and Thatcherism**

The evidence presented in this snapshot of *Analysis* in the mid 1990s suggests that programme producers had sized on an opportunity to reflect the latest trend in intellectual debate about politics and had not hesitated to hand the programme over to those at the vanguard of this ideological shift. For historians of radio current affairs this should come as no surprise. In the period 1975 to 1979, when Margaret Thatcher was leader of the Conservative Party but before she became Prime Minister, neo-liberal, free market ideas were beginning to have an impact on the Conservative Party. *Analysis* became a place in the BBC radio schedule where some of these ideas were expressed and, as in 1995, prominent thinkers were asked to present the programme. A good example of this was John (later Lord) Vaizey, a former Labour Party member and enthusiastic friend and supporter of Thatcher who presented 11 editions of *Analysis* in 1975 and 1976.[vi] The similarities between the emergence of Thatcherism in the mid 1970s and the development of the Third Way and Blairism in the mid 1990s are clear. In both cases, the party in opposition, with a dynamic and ambitious new leader, found itself looking for new policy ideas and ideological direction. Margaret Thatcher had been elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 at a time when neo-liberal and free market ideas were increasingly gaining some common currency. Once again policy think tanks provided some of the background research and policy ideas and the Institute of Economic Affairs was the Demos of the time. Just as *Analysis* provided a platform for Third Way ideas and, crucially, Third Way thinkers in the 1990s, so it was that isolated space on the BBC in the 1970s where new right-wing ideas could be heard. The IEA inspired ‘counter-revolution’ in Conservative thinking (Cockett, 1994: 188) can be reduced to some basic principles including hostility to the trade unions; the failure of nationalised industries; the importance of profit and enterprise; the Soviet threat; the danger of Marxism in Britain and social security ‘scrounging’. Just as Geoff Mulgan, one of the architects of the Third Way, was handed *Analysis* to present in the 1990s so John Vaizey, a close friend and adviser of Thatcher’s (Cockett, 228) was given the opportunity to present the programme and use it to express his own form of proto-Thatcherism.

Vaizey was an ideal presenter for *Analysis* in the mid 1970s. Being nominally part of the Labour establishment but with quite vocal right wing opinions he was able to open the programme up to Thatcherite values and priorities at a crucial time in the growth of the Conservative counter-revolution. His uncertain political allegiances made it difficult to accuse the programme of political partisanship. He focused on the Thatcherite domestic agenda including profit, poverty, the failures of progressive education and the Marxist threat. In his comments throughout each programme and especially his concluding remarks he repeatedly adopted a position on the Conservative right.[vii]

There is compelling evidence that in the 1970s and 1990s, *Analysis*, BBC Radio Four’s flagship current affairs programme, became a sounding board for new political ideas. Not only was this the place to hear the radicalism of proto-Thatcherism and then the Third Way but, certainly in the latter case, expressed by some of its leading theorists. In both cases, committed advocates of the new ideologies were handed the programme to present, and both Vaizey and Mulgan, among others, used the essay style of *Analysis* and the selection of contributors to create programmes which articulated their political views.

## **Commentary**

There was a logic to the *Analysis* romance with neo-liberalism in the 1970s; *Analysis*, with its

self-conscious elitism had solid Tory credentials. Both the main producer and presenter of the programme in its early years, George Fischer and Ian McIntyre, were well-known men of the political right (Hendy, 2007: 61; 153) and the regular listener would have been familiar with, for example, Peter Oppenheimer's anti-trade union views or Laurence Martin's ferocious cold war rhetoric.[viii] It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the ideas of the Conservative counter-revolution found a place in the BBC's most right leaning programme. Michael Green[ix], whose credentials as an observer of BBC radio current affairs are unsurpassed, has commented that,

Thatcherism came as an astonishing surprise to the BBC, it came from nowhere ... in a way, *Analysis* was a sort of beacon of unorthodoxy in this sea of liberal progressive consensus where the Right, particularly the Right and the challenging Right was not much heard. I think it surfaced rather more in *Analysis* than in some other places. [x]

The *Analysis* coverage of Third Way ideas is perhaps more surprising. In its first two decades the programme had welcomed academics from Oxford, London and, to a lesser extent, Cambridge universities as contributors and presenters. It was hardly surprising that an elitist BBC radio programme should turn to the elite universities for intellectual input. The Third Way, however, was explicitly linked to the social sciences and as a result the programme reached out to sociologists and others in non-elite universities. The 'high table' feel of *Analysis*, of Oxbridge dons conversing after dinner, was replaced by the voices of American postmodernists, Demos policy 'wonks' and Essex University sociologists. If anything this made the programme more intellectually demanding as the obscurity of social science language and concepts became dominant.

There is a particular irony in the presentation of Third Way ideas on *Analysis*. One of the core beliefs of the Third Way was to find alternative means of political communication. Mulgan himself lamented the 'closed system of opinion formation, opinion legitimation and opinion consumption' which 'seemed to exclude a sovereign electorate' (Mulgan, 1994; 21). *Analysis*, that most cerebral and rarified of programmes, was a singularly inappropriate place to challenge political elitism. Indeed, the fact that *Analysis* was used by Giddens, Mulgan and others to present their new ideas seems to reinforce the argument that the Third Way (and later, Blairism) was fundamentally detached from the Labour Party's working class constituency.

Although the primary focus of this article is historical, the lessons of this trawl through the *Analysis* archive inevitably leads to questions about the programme today. Is there any evidence of *Analysis* providing a platform for an ideological shift in the party of opposition as it did in the case of Thatcherism and the Third Way? Following Labour's defeat in the 2010 General Election and the election of Ed Miliband as leader, a group emerged in the party calling itself 'Blue Labour'. The new movement distances itself from the liberalism and perceived elitism of New Labour and has attempted to reconnect with Labour's traditional working class base. This has included some controversial ideas about the value of traditional communities and the dangers of immigration. Although it is much too early to see if *Analysis* is providing an ideological space for these new ideas and their advocates there has been at least one edition of the programme, broadcast on 21 March 2011, which featured some of the Blue Labour thinkers and was devoted to the new movement. It was presented by David Goodhart, the former Editor of *Prospect* magazine and featured Maurice Glasman and Marc Stears, both prominent figures in the Blue Labour movement.[xi] This was a classic example of an *Analysis* intervention in the development of political ideas which included two of the main advocates of Blue Labour and,

intriguingly, an external presenter with strong, if hidden, Blue Labour sympathies. Although meticulously balanced in his handling of the discussion, Goodhart has a strong track record advocating what are now seen as Blue Labour ideas including his provocative appeal for a rethinking of the value of diversity, ‘the left’s recent love affair with diversity may come at the expense of the values and even the people that it once championed’. (2004)

The evidence presented here raises questions about the impartiality of BBC political coverage but I suggest that is a sterile debate. The issue is surely not whether a particular programme is partisan but rather how radio current affairs contributes to the public sphere. This might be seen as a generous interpretation but given the long-term decline of television current affairs[xii] it is hard not to agree with the views of *Analysis* itself reflecting about its past political leanings. In a recent edition of the programme to mark its fortieth anniversary and titled ‘The Secret History of Analysis’ the long standing producer, Michael Blastland, defended the programme’s closeness to certain ideologies at certain times in terms of a diverse curiosity which may be fashioned in ‘our own personal past’. He felt that it was legitimate for the programme to follow the curiosity and personal interests of programme makers and presenters and there can be no doubt that that is what it has done and continues to do. The result has been that on two and possibly three occasions, to find out what was at the vanguard of political thought could be achieved by simply turning on the radio.

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## Editions of *Analysis* on the Third Way

‘The End of Enlightenment’ 26.1.1995

‘The Human Factor’ 16.3.95

‘The Pursuit of Happiness’ 23.3.95

‘Thinking Ahead’ 25.5.95



'Obsolete Signposts' 12.10.95  
'Legitimate Concerns' 26.10.95  
'Fairly Modern' 14.12.95  
'Security Alert' 27.6.96  
'A New Kind of Democrat' 24.10.96  
'The End of Everything' 31.10.96

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[i] Based on extensive deliberation at the end of the 1960s, Broadcasting in the Seventies suggested a more streamlined and, to some, populist approach to radio which led to a vigorous campaign in defence of broadcasting standards.

[ii] These descriptions were provided by former and current Analysis producers in interview.

[iii] A good example of documentary's ability to be bold and innovative was the highly successful BBC 2 series, Modern Times.

[iv] Birt's commitment to depth and rigour in news reporting was famously articulated in a series of Times articles in 1975 written with his London Weekend Television colleague, Peter Jay which expressed the so-called 'Birt-Jay thesis'.

[v] In his later work (1998) Giddens stated that the book grew out of a series of discussions with Geoff Mulgan among others.

[vi] Vaizey was one of a group of people who deserted the left for Thatcherism as documented in Patrick Cormack's Right Turn: Eight Men who Changed their Minds (London: Leo Cooper, 1978).

[vii] A good example of Vaizey's style can be seen in this transcript, '...in the 1945 Parliament several Labour MPs were expelled because they were Communists or Crypto-Communists. I'm assured that a similar purge now would lead to the expulsion of several MPs from the Labour Party. And in the Trade Union movement, many influential posts are openly held by Communists or Trotskyists. Whether this is to be regarded as subversive or not depends upon your point of view. From the point of view of the great majority of people who accept democratic and constitutional ideas, the threat to our society is undoubtedly serious. It isn't so much that one day we'll wake up to see Russian troops disembarking at Tilbury as that the subversion will take the form of corrupting and breaking up the institutions which make democracy work.' (Analysis, 4 December 1975)

[viii] See for example Peter Oppenheimer's 'The Stony Road' (Analysis, 15 May 1975) and Laurence Martin's 'NATO and the Uncertain Balance' (Analysis 26 February 1976).

[ix] An Analysis producer who then launched File on Four and was Controller, Radio Four, 1986-96.

[x] Interview with Michael Green, 27 October 2000.

[xi] See their contributions to Glasman, M., Rutherford, J., Stears, M. White, (eds.) The Labour tradition and the Politics of Paradox (www.soundings.org.uk 2011).

[xii] Powerfully articulated in Barnett and Seymour (1999).