

Mike Wayne, *England's Discontents: Political Cultures and National Identities* (Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 282. ISBN: 9780745399331 (pb), £19.99.

In this ambitious and synoptic but accessible and incisive history of British political identities over the last two hundred years, Mike Wayne demonstrates with abundant verve and clarity how political traditions of conservatism, social liberalism, economic liberalism and social democracy have, in varying combinations, intersected and forged what Gramsci termed 'historic blocs'.

Although he is predominantly concerned with the way in which conservatism has sought to conceal its internal rifts and contradictions (long before the establishment of the European Union), one of the most interesting aspects of the book is its depiction of the 'oscillations of liberalism'. For example, Wayne demonstrates how liberalism's alliance with conservatism created a historic bloc during the nineteenth century which was durable but which can be characterized by tensions between Conservatism's grounding in *national* forms of resource and identity, and the way in which capitalism (given free rein in the politics of economic liberalism) has disavowed and transcended national borders. Similarly Conservatism's obsessions with morality, deference and time-honoured markers of social status are challenged by capitalism's 'present-tense and short-term future temporality' (115).

Wayne suggests, however, that we should be careful not to regard such contradictions as merely debilitating, as they can instead be generative of a kind of constructive ambiguity. At the heart of the book, for example, is a rigorous and persuasive critique of the (Tom) Nairn/(Perry) Anderson thesis of 'blocked modernity' - that Conservatism's archaic and aristocratic political culture and commitment to certain forms of capital associated with the City retarded the modernisation of Britain's industrial base. Nairn and Anderson apparently overlooked the vital role and presence of (*laissez-faire*) liberalism in the historic bloc, and the way in which this was in some ways concealed by the ideological 'cloak' of conservatism: 'Conservatism's social, spatial and temporal distancing from production at the cultural level was perfectly compatible with letting the market operate with less and less of impediments in the way of custom and habit' (251).

The driving force behind the decomposition of this historic bloc was the struggle by the industrial working classes to gain political recognition and representation. In the post-war period this opened the way for an increased role for state intervention in the economy, and for an accommodation between social liberalism and social democracy that saw the birth of the welfare state. This historical bloc is sometimes referred to as the post-war settlement or consensus (in these terms the fact of partnership between political traditions or factions is, for once, acknowledged) which lasted until the advent of Thatcherism and the ascendance of economic liberalism or neo-liberalism. The catastrophic destruction of the post-war consensus is documented in popular British films such as *The Full Monty* (1997), *Billy Elliot* (2000) but only belatedly, and, as Wayne argues, their primary focus is on the social mobility unleashed by the performing arts as an escape route from a social environment characterised by insularity and intolerance.

These historic blocs have been riven by tensions and rifts (to some extent inherent in the conflict between the pairings of political traditions or identities) which have proved to be their undoing, and Wayne believes that, presently, 'the historic bloc of economic liberalism, conservatism and social liberalism is vulnerable and open to challenge in a way that has not been the case for around forty years' (214). Rifts have, of course, been exposed by the referenda on Scottish Independence and membership of the European Union, and the complex fracturing of the contemporary hegemonic bloc in recent years is adeptly explained here (and summarised nicely as 'power without hegemony'). Wayne is also highly articulate about the way in which the campaign(s) for Scottish independence put social democracy

back onto the agenda, as a challenge to neo-liberalism. By contrast, Wayne has relatively little to say about Labour under Jeremy Corbyn but he clearly regards recent developments as a necessary and long-awaited overhaul of Labourism's obsession with a top-down, paternalist or managerial parliamentarism that, as Stuart Hall has noted, merely replicated the wider tendency to 'discipline the class struggle' on behalf of capital. This may be attributable to a recognition that the recent revival of the Left is actually quite 'shallow' and comes after 'four decades of defeat' (240). Wayne provides us with a salutary and sobering reminder that 'social democracy cannot be a stable end-destination within the dynamics of capitalism' (ibid.). Especially in such politically volatile and unpredictable times it is very difficult to state what the actual end-destination might (instead) be, but there could perhaps have been more analysis of the significance of Labour's Manifesto, Momentum and the future direction of the British Left, with all the 'growing pains' concomitant with Labour's expanded and revitalised membership.

In attempting to outline the shape of potential counter-hegemonic challenges to the contemporary historic bloc, Wayne engages with some of the more neglected aspects of Stuart Hall's work of the 1980s, particularly his underrated and prolific contributions to *Marxism Today*, which called for the Left to take ideology and the battle of ideas more seriously. In line with this re-assessment of the strategic interventions of public (or organic) intellectuals in the area of culture and media, Wayne also provides a refreshingly unblinkered reevaluation of the Griersonian documentary 'project'. In contrast to the familiar complaints about the (perceived) paternalism and relative conservatism of this tradition, Wayne points to the way in which Grierson played a key role in ushering in the emerging social-democratic political culture otherwise associated with the 1945 victory of the Labour Party, leaving behind a legacy not just of films but of writings that remain 'a fascinating trace of a cultural and political battle to reshape the British State and the British national identity' (168). There is certainly more to be said about (the political ramifications of) the 'education for democracy' that Grierson sought to institute in this country, especially given the nuanced and detailed documents and assessments that exist of Grierson's attempts to develop the relationship between documentary and citizenship in the Commonwealth (Canada and New Zealand) after he left Britain for Canada in 1939.

As Wayne notes towards the end of the book, it is imperative that we heed Grierson's ambitious approach as we attempt to 'find ways of making a democratic and participatory civic identity vivid for people' (242). Although any suggestions about how to achieve this in practice are here rather few and vague, it is nevertheless certainly true to say that this is an engrossing book with wide and deep historical scope that simultaneously manages to function as an indispensable primer or signpost for the contemporary political and constitutional crisis.

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