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Flip-Flopping on Europe: The British Left, Torn Between Nationalism and Transnationalism

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1 For the left movements in Europe, the European integration process poses serious challenges, but also new opportunities. On the one hand, it challenges national compromises between representatives of labor, businesses, and the state. National systems of industrial relations, welfare state systems, employment services, pension funds, and training systems often express these compromises. On the other hand, the European Union (EU) might be an alternative to politically unregulated forms of globalization and a basis for new, transnational forms of interest representation and social security. Left groups must therefore choose between a defensive and an offensive Europeanization strategy: they can oppose the European integration processes and defend national agreements and regimes, or shape the EU according to their aims.

2 Andrew Mullen discusses in great detail how the British left has faced the opportunities and challenges of the European integration since the Second World War. His book is based on a very broad conception of the Left, which includes not only the Labour Party and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), but also the “wider Left,” for example, green, communist, socialist, and nationalist parties and pressure groups and think tanks (55 organizations in total).

3 After a short history of the European integration project and European policies in the global context, the author discusses in 13 chapters the various positions of the British Left towards the European integration since 1945. These chapters are in general structured according to a common pattern. At first, the author explains the policy of the British State, then the policies of the Labour Party and the TUC, then the position of the big British trade unions, and finally the positions of selected organizations of the wider British Left. The empirical basis of these analyses, which is the main part of the book (circa 200 pages), are official policy documents — especially annual conference and congress reports — plus some in-depth interviews with key actors, such as Tony Benn, who has also contributed a foreword to the book welcoming it as “by far the best book about the many long debates that have taken place on the left about Britain’s relations with Europe.” The third part of the book is composed of a summary and an attempt to explain the empirical results on the basis of a neo-Gramscian international political economy approach and a discussion of rival visions of Europe and its possible evolutions.

4 The book shows convincingly that the European integration policies of the British Left underwent three “tectonic policy shifts” during the post-war period: the first from 1945 to 1970 (from disinterest or neutrality to support for the British entry into the European Economic Community or EEC, now EU), the second from 1971 to 1987 (from support to opposition culminating in the 1975 referendum when the Left nearly entirely opposed continued membership), and the third since 1988 (from skepticism...
or hostility towards the EU to a strong support, which has been analyzed as Europeanization of the British Left). However, not all parties and organizations perform these three shifts in the same way and period. For example, Mullen observed eight changes of position for the TUC and seven for the Labour Party (249). When the Labour Party was in government, it tended to be pro-European (especially from 1966-1970 and 1974-1976 under Harold Wilson, from 1976 to 1979 under James Callaghan and from 1997-2007 under Tony Blair), while it opposed the European integration, when it was in opposition (between 1959 and 1964, between 1970 and 1974, and between 1979 and 1988).

In the first phase, when the EEC was founded and the UK applied three times for accession to it, both the UK and the British Left tried to keep Britain’s former advantages as a global empire. They wanted to preserve the Imperial Preference system (reciprocally-leveled tariffs within the Commonwealth) and the British role as the “banker of the sterling area” until the beginning of the 1970s (76). A customs union or a common European market would endanger this integration with other Commonwealth countries. The crucial points of reference of British foreign policy at that time were a limited European perspective, the historical Commonwealth, and the “special relationship” with the USA. The UK was seen at the centre of these “three great circles” — but not exclusively in Europe. Therefore, the postwar Labour government pursued only a partial engagement with the emerging EU and intergovernmental, not supranational patterns of cooperation.

This neo-imperial trade, monetary and foreign policy became increasingly illusionary and was replaced in the early 1960s by the Conservative government — which thus became the “party of Europe” until the 1980s — and by the Labour Party, which formulated five conditions of its support for an accession to the EEC in 1962, which however were largely incompatible with the aims of the EEC (75). The trade unions preferred a “wait and see” strategy. At least from a continental European point of view, it is exaggerated to call this cautiously positive attitude towards the EEC a “tectonic shift.”

In the 1970s, the limited liability strategy of the British Left was replaced by a skeptical or even hostile position towards the EEC as demonstrated during the renegotiations of the terms of membership in 1974 and the referendum on the continued membership in 1975. While most of the ministers of the new labor government were in favor of a continued EEC membership, the left of the Labour Party (e.g., Tony Benn) campaigned for a withdrawal, which became in the 1980s the official policy of the party. Mullen explains the overwhelming majority for a continued membership of Britain in the EEC also by the intervention of the CIA (114) and by “the trend of obfuscation and deceit about the true implications of ‘ever closer union’” (119).

In the debate on the reform of the EEC (1976-79), the Labour Party and especially its left wing opposed the common agricultural policy, the European Monetary System, the EEC budget, and the creation and strengthening of the European Parliament. This strategy can be explained by the preference for the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), the official strategy of the Labour Party from 1973-1983, which aimed at an expansion of public ownership, economic planning, price controls, and the protection of industrial sectors (Wickham-Jones 1996) — objectives hardly compatible with an integrated European market. Therefore, the preference for an “economically nationalist” program (122) instead of a transnational European perspective characterized the second “tectonic shift.” The unresolved differences between the leadership of the Labour Party (already in government) and its Congress decisions and most of the unions heightened this undecidenedness of the British Left vis-à-vis Europe.

After their defeat at the 1979 election, the Labour Party went through a period of bitter internal rivalry. The dominant left wing was able to define the agenda and impose its policy of withdrawal from the EU. But already since the mid 1980s, the skeptical, economically nationalist evaluation of the EEC had been slowly transformed by the recognition that the EU had become the “only card game in town.” Instead of withdrawal and a fundamental opposition against any power shift to the European level, some Labour leaders, and increasingly the whole party and the unions, pleaded for a coordinated reflation, and a Euro-Keynesian economic recovery package. The unions intensified their cooperation with their European counterpart, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). Mullen characterizes the period from 1988-96 as “constructive engagement” (151), especially for a social Europe, but also for the Common Market and even for a single currency. The British Left discovered Europe in this period as an opportunity for advancing its own agenda. The author assigns this Europeanization of the Labour party mainly to the Labour leadership (153) — and also to the help of the CIA (137).

With the shift to “New Labour,” the Labour Party even became the new party of Europe pursuing an overtly pro-EU agenda (207). Tony Blair signed the Social Charter and supported the Amsterdam and Nice Treaties and the fifth enlargement.
But the UK did not introduce the Euro, it did not implement the Schengen acquis (that is, the abolition of systematic border controls) and it weakened the common foreign and security policy of the EU in the negotiations leading to the Lisbon Treaty (2007). Instead of the metaphor of tectonic shifts, the concept of shifting equilibriums therefore would be more appropriate. Deeply disappointed by the European policy of New Labour, Mullen argues that Blair “pursued a neo-liberal rather than Euro-Keynesian strategy” (213) — without explaining why the British policy between 1997 and 2005 has to be considered a neo-liberal one. At least the expenditure on social protection in these years was relatively stable (27.3 % and 26.8 % of GDP) and the unemployment rate declined from 7.1 % to 4.7 % (source: Eurostat).

Finally, the author discusses different explanations for the three shifts observed: nine for the first, fifteen for the second and twenty for the third. Among others, the third shift for example is explained by the end of the Cold War, the perceived redundancy of national Keynesianism, the fear of being contaminated by right-wing Euroscepticism, the opposition to Margaret Thatcher, and the conflation of Europeanization with modernization. However, listing 44 explanatory factors comes close to a renunciation of any systematic explanation. Therefore, the author proposes an international political economy approach on the basis of the Coxian historicism, which analyses historical processes as a result of economic and political actors (Cox and Skidmore-Hess 1999). On this basis, Mullen distinguishes different fractions of national and international labor and capital and explains the first shift leading to the support of the European integration by the common interest of international capital and the Labour leadership in the joint exploitation of Europe’s former colonies. The second shift (1971-87) is interpreted as an attempt of a producer’s alliance between national capital and national labor aiming at a “national progressive-socialist strategy” (279), while the third shift since 1988 reflects the internationalization of finance and production and the limitations of national Keynesianism and socialist projects.

Mullen has convincingly demonstrated the shift of the British Left from a neo-colonialist to a nationalist and a European perspective. He has made ample use of the available documents and literature on an extremely broad spectrum of left organizations and thus has described the policy of the British Left towards the European integration in a comprehensive way never attempted before. The major strength of his book is the careful and extremely thorough analysis of positions of a wide array of left parties, unions, groups, and think tanks. Yet two weaknesses undermine the overall effort.

First, the author demonstrates a certain inclination towards conspiracy theories when he points to the role of the CIA (268), or when he focuses on a systematic gap between the membership and the leadership of the Labour Party, the TUC and big trade unions. He explains that the leadership of the Labour Party, the TUC and the big trade unions “have capitulated to neo-liberalism and have accepted the ‘end of history’ and ‘powerless state’ theses” (285). It is hard to believe that an intelligence service can change the policies of such a broad and heterogeneous spectrum as the British Left or that leader — and membership of mass organizations can be durably alienated. For the author, the world seems to be neatly divided in black and white: On one side, the neoliberal EU, the Labour governments and the leaderships of the Labour Party and the unions, and on the other side, the protagonists of national progressive-socialist strategies. He never discusses if public ownership, national planning, import controls, a national Keynesianism or the Commonwealth of Europe (a model the author obviously prefers; 242) are practical and realistic options.

Second, the author reveals his theoretical approach only after 270 pages with detailed empirical analyses. But the Coxian framework is not really elaborated. The interpretation of the empirical data on the eight pages dedicated to this attempt is too slim. Thus, the theoretical framework of the book is underdeveloped and not used as the basis for the empirical analysis; the broad description of different fractions of capital and labor and the concrete empirical evidence are not convincingly integrated.

In spite of these two critical points, this book is of interest to everybody who studies the Europeanization processes of national societies, and especially the politics of the Left in the European integration process. The British Left’s ‘Great Debate’ on Europe raises the important question of how the European dimension of national policies transforms the domestic focus of political groups and how references to “Europe” are used in national agenda setting and negotiation processes.

References

Wickham-Jones, Mark. Economic Strategy and the Labour Party: Politics and