

THE ABUSE OF HISTORY III:
The 'New' Labour Project

By

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Two events earlier this year- the death of the Queen Mother and the golden jubilee celebrations of the Queen - provide some insights into the otherwise puzzling behaviour of the Blair government in Britain and their so called 'New' Labour project. These are connected to the major theme of this series: the transmogrification of the Left by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci.

Many in the UK believe that the Blairites are just closet Conservatives who have stolen the Tories clothes, and merely present a more caring sharing image to garner votes. They do not seem to be socialists in any sense of the term, what with their going to bed with Big Business and limited attempts to reverse the great defeat suffered by their major sponsors and financiers, the Trades Unions, at the hands of Baroness Thatcher. Their addiction to 'spin' and 'focus groups' is said to merely reflect the lessons they learnt from the successful Clinton election campaigns in the United States, while their paranoia about any of their members going 'off message' is the result of the trauma suffered in four electoral defeats.

The ideology they claim to espouse to replace the old religion is the so-called 'middle way'. The New Democrats in the US also pioneered this. It recognizes that, without the support of the middle classes they would not get elected. Both opted for policy packages – eschewing income redistribution (previously the distinguishing mark of socialists), fiscal and monetary rectitude, eschewing tax rises (except by stealth) on the middle classes, replacing welfare with workfare, toughness (at least rhetorically) on crime- which would cheer the hearts of any blue blooded Conservative. The 'middle way' is thus seen both by the old Left and the Right as an ideologically meaningless mish mash, which presents an electorally attractive package to clothe what is nothing more noble than old fashioned careerism. Everyone is now a Tory- except that New Labour seems to have the more telegenic and prettier faces. Thence, the refusal of the Tories to advocate any policies different from New Labour's after their two traumatic defeats, and hectic search for ways to appear nice rather than nasty.

But is ideology in Britain really at an end? I doubt it for a number of reasons. Socialism was a peculiarly European disease. It never succeeding in infecting the United States. Clinton's New Democrats were not involved in any great ideological betrayal of the socialist goals the party had earlier espoused. By contrast New Labour did seemingly renounce its heritage as many of its reconstructed members are still bewailing. But this does not altogether seem to ring true. For after all of the four major architects of New Labour, Peter Mandelson (the grandson of the Old Labour politician Herbert Morrison), Gordon Brown (a life long member of Old Labour and a student activist who was elected on a left wing ticket to the Rectorship of Edinburgh university), Alastair Campbell (a life long Old labour journalist) and Tony Blair (who though brought up in a Conservative household and educated at a leading Scottish public school was still in the early 1980;s a

card carrying member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), did believe passionately in the old religion. Moreover, most of the 'New' Labour MP's are former polytechnic lecturers (notoriously infected by 'cultural studies') and social workers who all have a penchant for 'theory'.

Then there is 'New' Labour's constant harking on 'modernizing' Britain and attempts to erode its history, with the partial dismemberment of the United Kingdom through devolution, and the desire to merge Britain into a European super state. Here many of the 'new' historians have provided ammunition. In an influential book *Britons*, the LSE deconstructionist historian Linda Colley has argued that the British state was an imperial creation of the English, beginning with the subjugation of the Scots and the Irish who then extended their sway to all parts of the globe. Once the 'foreign' empire was dismembered there is no continuing justification for the 'domestic' empire. So, just as there was nothing natural about the creation of the United Kingdom, its dismemberment will be nothing more than the final winding up of the English empire.

Moreover, this deconstruction of British history will allow Britain to be fully merged in a European Union which has no history and whose members are united in trying to erase their past history. For unlike Great Britain, which can justly be proud of its long history of peaceful and prosperous domestic evolution, in which it has seen off all the European powers attempting to create a European and world empire (from the Spanish in the 16th, the French in the 18th and 19th and the Germans in the 20th centuries), the domestic history of continental Europe is one of political debacles, bloodshed and defeat. It is hardly surprising they do not want to remember their histories, and would rather start with a clean slate in a United States of Europe. Erasing Britain's history is therefore very much part of the 'modernising' project, which would be sealed by a merger of the UK into a European super- state.

But why should the Blairites be so keen to erase Britain's history? The answer goes back to Gramsci- the Italian Marxist who has replaced Karl as the ideologue of the Left tendency. As I outlined in my last column, for Gramscians the struggle for political power involves a struggle to shape and dominate belief and sentiment –to establish Gramsci's 'hegemony'. The adherence of the masses in capitalist democratic societies to the existing hegemony is molded by their traditions, i.e. their history. To replace this 'hegemony' with the virtuous one of the Left must involve weaning them away from these traditions, from their history, in short by 'modernising'.

At the apex of these traditions and British history stands the monarchy. Hence, the Queen must be brought into Tony's Big Tent. It seemed, with the wrong footing of the Royal family, its upstaging by the People's Prime Minister at the death of the People's Princess, Diana, and the surprising public outpouring of grief- particularly among the young and 'socially excluded'- that the 'modernising' hegemony was about to be established.

Then, the Queen Mother- the last Empress of India- died. To the 'modernisers' astonishment, there were huge crowds lining up for miles, waiting night and day to file past her coffin lying in state in Westminster. They included every age and ethnic group. The fury that was then caused in Downing Street by the exposure of the People's Prime Minister to upstage the royals in the dispute with Black Rod is one major clue to the implicit Gramscian agenda of 'New' Labour. The old Queen in her death had shown up

the vainglorious hope that the British were about to give up the 'hegemony' of their history,

Worse was to come with the celebrations of the Queen's golden jubilee. Showing a public relations astuteness that seemed to have left it at the time of Princess Diana's death, the Palace put on pageants and concerts which saw the young and old from every background join in a massive multicultural celebration of the monarchy, whose flawless execution showed up the pathetic vacuousness of New Labour's own 'modernising' millennium fest at the now busted Dome.

Just this year it is two-nil to the monarchy, British history and the old 'hegemony', against the 'modernisers'. If in the widely expected referendum on the Euro next year, the British public rejects the proposed merger with Europe and the erasure of its own remarkable history, the 'modernising' project will hopefully be seen to have failed, and with it this latest incarnation of the utopian socialist illusion.

(this is last column in this series)