



Jonathan Joseph

Critical Realism and Postwar British Politics

POSTWAR BRITISH POLITICS IN PERSPECTIVE. Polity, Cambridge, 1999. x, 251pp. ISBN 0-7456-2030-2 (pbk).
By David Marsh, Jim Buller, Colin Hay, Jim Johnson, Peter Kerr, Stuart McAnulla and Matthew Watson.

This is a strange but interesting hybrid, a cross between a student centred textbook on British postwar politics and an elaboration of critical realist political theory.

The book begins by criticising traditional approaches and raises the need to adopt a number of critical realist positions. These include a strong historical perspective that is theoretically informed but empirically grounded; a conception of change that recognises political, economic and ideological factors; a dialectical understanding of the relation between structure and agency and the material and ideational; and a stated and developed epistemological position (1-2). There then follows a familiar questioning of positivism and relativism followed by a statement on the core of critical realism which includes the argument for an independently existing reality with deep structures, causal relations, discursive constructions and reflexive agents (13-14).

For the authors, the standard material on the postwar period contains too much heroic generalisation with its emphasis on great people and events. Consequently, there is a failure to properly reflect on the mechanisms of social and political change leading to a static conception of the postwar period. This is combined with an instrumentalist emphasis on observable decision making reflecting the traditional British preoccupation with strong leadership coupled to a conservative view of social change. Throughout the book the authors make the point that such conceptions affect both the theorisation of the period and the outlook of the political actors themselves.

Anderson-Nairn under attack

Colin Hay examines the relation between structure and agency by critiquing Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's thesis on British exceptionalism. According to this theory, recent history suffers from the incomplete nature of the bourgeois revolution. For Hay, this is an oversimplified approach which contains some truth, but absolves all subsequent actors. Similar criticisms have been made by Poulantzas and Jessop. Continuing this line of argument, Hay takes up a strategic-relational approach emphasising the reflexive and strategic character of social actors within densely structured contexts which favour certain strategies over others (39-40). The idea of selective strategies connects with the critical realist point about the uneven distribution of opportunities and resources.

Anderson is again attacked in Johnston's paper. His culturalist emphasis means that problems of social and political development are blamed on a resilient parasitic aristocracy. For Johnston, there is some similarity between this view and those of the right-wing neo-liberals. They

raise common concerns about the lack of competence among the capitalist class, the backward-looking liberal elite, the failings of elitist education and the role of corporatist trade unions (48). Britain is constrained by a particular institutional settlement. According to the cultural thesis, hegemony is based on the attitudes, beliefs, values and morality of a traditional ruling class, united by its imperial role, but unfit for modern capitalist development.

The idea that Britain's relative economic decline is linked to the failure to politically modernise is a theme taken up by more recent writers like Will Hutton. It might even be said to be part of New Labour's ideology. But what is missing from the theoretical approach is an analysis of specific political developments. It depends on an overly structural notion of a fossilised ruling class combined with an overly idealist emphasis on the superstructure (55).

Consensus vs conflict and crisis

Kerr challenges the idea that there was a postwar consensus. The true dynamic behind policy was conflict between groups such as politicians, producers, trade unions and financiers. There is therefore not one coherent ideology, but several, based on conflicts between Keynesian, monetarist, laissez-faire and corporatist perspectives. This creates a constantly evolving state settlement (84).

Hay places more emphasis on crisis. This chapter includes a good critique of regulation theory which is accused of reducing the state to a functional agent of capitalist regulation, promoting the idea that the state can impose a 'functional fix' during moments of crisis (99). Again, this is based on a static view of institutional complexity. Hay offers an alternative view of the postwar period based on Gramsci's idea of passive revolution. This locates conscious projects within a structural context with the emphasis on the need to secure consent and maintain institutional cohesion while warding off any threat from below.

Globalisation as neo-liberal ideology

Watson's chapter on globalisation makes a number of useful arguments that challenge the globalisation thesis. Whereas much of the left has gone along with the idea of globalisation, Watson links the promotion of the thesis to the advancement of right-wing policies – it is the ideological facade behind the neo-liberal agenda, a rhetorical device used to discipline expectations of what is feasible. It is true that a degree of globalisation is taking place – in particular, the volume of financial flows limits the power of national governments. But what passes for an account of globalisation is often an account of state action. Globalising tendencies are purposely produced by state

actors. Understood in class terms, globalisation encompasses a range of ideas and normative assumptions that are used to legitimate certain forms of domination. Hence, what distinguishes the current period is not globalisation itself, but the institutionalised balance of class forces who have appropriated the discourse on globalisation to further their own interests (142-43).

Reflexive learning experience

Kerr and Marsh see Thatcherism as a conditioned response to Britain's decline that is limited by the weakness of economic structures and the constraints of previous failed attempts. They are keen to promote an active conception of history so that various postwar projects are seen as strategic interventions, conditioned by their own meanings and objectives (182). It is argued that Thatcherism first emerged as a critique of the largely mythical practices of the postwar period. It was initially an ill-defined and poorly articulated strategy that only developed through a reflexive learning experience (186). The book concludes by questioning the notion of a new postwar consensus, as well as raising doubts about the degree to which Thatcherism challenged this consensus. Throughout this period there were important continuities in some areas, significant disagreements in others. The process of change was complex and evolutionary (212).

This then, is the basic outline of the book. Two wider considerations remain.

Primacy of agency?

First, the authors correctly stress the need to see structure and agency as standing in a dialectical relationship, but sometimes there seems to be too much emphasis on agency. They are keen to stress the concept of reflexivity and the notion that through action agents become more aware of their strategic relationship with their environment. This is certainly true, but critical realist concepts like the transformational model of social activity do insist that social structures pre-exist the actions of agents (rather than being instantiated by them in the present) and that consequently social structure has a greater determining power. At times it seems as if the book is giving equal weight to both when in fact it is structure that has causal primacy. Structure and agency may stand in a dialectical relationship, but this does

not mean it is an equal relationship.

In summarising the differences between the authors it is stated that Hay, Watson and McAnulla place more emphasis on the explanatory power of the ideational as determining political action (220). Thus the consensus thesis itself, whether true or not, had a strong impact on subsequent political actors. Although structures constrain and facilitate agents, it is agents who interpret those structures and develop them (218). Again, such a statement is true, but could be developed in different ways depending on whether we regard structure and agency as 'entwined' and constitutive of each other, or whether we see structure as necessarily prior to agency. According to the latter view, agents do indeed interpret and develop structures, but this only has explanatory significance under certain conditions. Generally, the actions and interpretations of agents occur within the context of structural reproduction where reproduction is the unintended or non-conscious outcome of certain beliefs and actions. Thus the ability to interpret and develop social structures is severely limited by these same structural conditions. Agency *is* a necessary feature of social reproduction, but the actions and interpretations of agents only assume a significance under certain conditions.

Can critical realism go it alone?

Second, the book purports to be an application of critical realism to political analysis, but is this strictly possible? Critical realism is seen as a guiding methodology that informs and directs the analysis, but are there other theories that can play such a role? What does seem to be lacking is a Marxist analysis. Although the book discusses some theories, like Anderson's, that are informed by a Marxist standpoint, the authors do not seem to take up Marxism themselves. Could it be, then, that critical realism is being posed as an alternative to a Marxist analysis? Can this be done? Is it possible to give an adequate explanation of the postwar period without explicitly adopting a Marxist viewpoint? This raises wider questions about what critical realism is. Can it, on its own, provide an adequate guide to understanding the social world, or must it act as a complement to a Marxist (or some other) approach? These questions are not raised in the book, but they are posed by its very presence. At stake is the future direction of critical realism. But this is another debate.

INTERVIEW WITH ROY BHASKAR

Chris Norris did an interview with Roy Bhaskar last year for the *Philosophy Magazine*, a short version of which was published in the *Philosophy Magazine*, 8, Autumn 1999. <http://www.philosophers.co.uk/current/bhaskar.htm>

A full copy of the interview has been placed by leave on the Bhaskar Archive (thanks to Wallace Polsom and *PM*): http://www.raggedclaws.com/criticalrealism/archive/rbhaskar_rbi.html

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