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The Third Way and beyond

Criticisms, futures
and alternatives

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Introduction

In the late 1990s Third Way governments were in power across Europe – and beyond, in the USA and Brazil, for instance. The Third Way experiment was one that attracted attention worldwide, and gurus of the Third Way could count on invitations to conferences and gatherings of the politically interested across the world.

Yet only a few years later the day of the Third Way seemed to have disappeared even more quickly than it had found itself in the ascendant. The New Democrats were defeated for the US presidency by Republican George W. Bush. Across Europe parties of the Right knocked out of power Third Way exponents from the Centre-Left. Blair in Britain, perhaps the Third Way's foremost advocate, remained in power but some of his Centre-Left colleagues in France, Spain, Italy and elsewhere found themselves ousted. The 'Neue Mitte' administration in Germany clung on to power by the narrowest of margins and in any case Chancellor Schröder was showing decidedly 'old' social democratic tendencies. The Right felt increasingly rejuvenated, often (but not always) speaking the language of nationalism and xenophobic populism, even to the extent of achieving a shocking level of support for far Right parties, in Austria and France, for example, but elsewhere also.

So why another book on the Third Way? This volume is based on a conference held in November 2000 at the University of Sussex.¹ It was not our intention to publish the proceedings. But the contributions to the conference generated such distinctive angles on the Third Way, and brought out so many new insights, that this book is the result. As its chapters were worked on over the next eighteen months or so, it became clearer that the Third Way had a greater longevity than a cursory glance might show.

The first marker of the continuing relevance of the Third Way is, of course, the presence of Third Way governments in power. Tony Blair in the UK was swept back into office with an emphatic victory in 2001, by a margin unusual for a prime minister years into government. Despite many opportunities to damage the Third Way New Labour Government, the opposition Conservative Party failed to make anything but the most marginal inroads into Labour's huge

parliamentary majority. In social democratic Sweden the Centre-Left held on to power in 2002 – in a country sometimes credited with originating welfare-to-work and the attempt, in typical Third Way style, to combine social justice *and* economic efficiency. As mentioned, the German SPD scraped back into power, and while the US Democrats lost a presidential election it was one in which they had the most votes. Even with war – that guaranteed vote winner for some countries – George W. Bush remains, at the time of writing, open to defeat by a new Democrat challenger when his term of office ends.²

Beyond the facts about who holds office, the Third Way has left a legacy which plays its part in defining the theory and politics of the early twenty-first century. The Right has to fight for power on the ground laid by the Third Way – responding to the Third Way agenda to make its way back, just as the Third Way itself was built on the ground left by ‘old’ social democracy and the New Right. In Britain, for instance, the Conservative Party’s attempt to return to power after New Labour’s 1997 victory was at first based on an attempt to differentiate itself from the Third Way by a move to the Right. After its defeat in 2001 it changed strategy to move to the centre-ground and attempted to beat New Labour on what were its own issues, such as social exclusion and public services. In both cases the Right was defining itself in relation to the approach of the incumbent Third Way Government. Furthermore the social changes posited by the Third Way as necessitating a new politics, the values they have argued for and the policies proposed for achieving those values have become established parts of the political landscape and agenda, whoever is in power.

As Will Leggett points out in chapter 10 of this book, an attempt to define the Third Way purely by its values or its policies misses out a vital part of the explanation: the social changes to which the Third Way is – or at least perceives itself to be – a response. Perhaps foremost among the social changes that the Third Way has imprinted on the political consciousness has been globalisation, especially economic globalisation. How are third-wayers to deal with this? For many third-wayers the chief response has been to actively promote economic liberalisation, to encourage free trade across national boundaries, to promote competition and deregulation and to incorporate more and more nations within this framework. In this way the Third Way has further established the approach of the New Right – or neo-liberalism. This has been the case at least for the historically more *laissez-faire* USA and UK; elsewhere it promoted a liberal approach which lacked such radical antecedents. The Centre-Left was able to pursue an economically liberal agenda which under the Right might have scared its electorates. As Leggett suggests, social changes such as globalisation are open to interpretation, as are possible responses to them. But the Third Way has laid down some commonly accepted interpretations of contemporary social transformations and how politicians should react to them. This is one plank of the enduring legacy and importance of the Third Way.

The means for dealing with globalisation have been heralded as a new pragmatism, neither the automatic market solutions of the New Right necessarily

(sometimes a bit of government intervention in social policy is needed) nor just the statism of the Old Left (the private sector and non-direct forms of state intervention can have a role). A Third Way is pragmatic about policies – it can combine right and left or be something which is neither. Eric Shaw's contribution (chapter 4) casts doubt on whether *pragmatism* is the right word for this – if judged on results alone, the role of the private sector in public services does not seem to deliver the goods, so it may be that there is something more ideological going on in the Third Way's predilection for private sector solutions. Nevertheless, the argument is that the policies for responding to the globalised economy and to social policy needs have to be pragmatic – neither Left nor Right but a mix of the two, which sees a role for both public and private in tackling social exclusion and the provision of public services. Third way approaches to economic and social policy have become part of the political agenda of many countries, whoever is in power.

To some, all this may sound thus far a bit more Right than Left – the politics of economic liberalisation and private sector involvement in public services. But Third Way supporters say there is more to it than this. For a start, a role remains for active government, but a redefined one. Government guarantees rather than delivers – for example, in the provision of some public services or employment opportunities. It tries to get people off welfare into work rather than judging its successes on the level of welfare payments to those dependent on the State or just leaving unemployment to market solutions. Furthermore, it brings in distinctive values of the Centre-Left. The Third Way, it is said, offers an antidote to the individualist values of the New Right. It argues for community and social inclusiveness facilitated by government, where the New Right argues that the market should solve the problems of those who were excluded, with the consequence often being that, in practice, divisions between the haves and the have-nots grow rather than shrink. The Third Way does not pursue old-style egalitarianism but also differs from the inegalitarian politics of the New Right, saying that the State has to step in to ensure opportunities for all, through education or welfare-to-work policies, for instance. As Goes notes (chapter 6), this often means establishing minimum opportunities, or sufficiency, rather than equality of opportunity. Nevertheless, it signals something different from the Right's offering – an emphatic role for government in tackling poverty and exclusion. What is more, this approach does not see economic efficiency and such social justice as in conflict – a Third Way favours not one or the other but argues that they can go together. For many, this is what is at the heart of a new communitarianism on the Centre-Left – one which tries to rebuild community through social inclusiveness. Some contributors to this book have their doubts. Sarah Hale argues (chapter 5) that the communitarianism of New Labour is nothing of the sort, at least when compared to what one of Tony Blair's supposed gurus – John Macmurray – means by *community*. Simon Prideaux establishes (chapter 7) some – in his view – inappropriate antecedents for community in the early thought of another alleged guru of the Third Way: Amitai Etzioni. Eunice Goes suggests that com-

munitarianism may be all well and good but that it has replaced one of the landmarks in left-wing thinking – a commitment to equality, a view similar to that put forward by David Morrison (chapter 9). For Paul Cammack (chapter 8), all this is just a rhetorical cover for more neo-liberalism. However, Pete McCullen and Colin Harris (chapter 3), as well as Stephen Driver (chapter 2), see elements of an egalitarian redistributive framework in the Third Way, or at least of some sort of continuing distinctively social democratic approach.

So in terms of social change, policies and values, the Third Way has left a well-established approach and set of ideas. Where Third Way governments continue in power – as, it should be remembered, they do – or where they have a solid basis for a return to power, those ideas continue to play a role. They also play a role in establishing what it is that the Right has to respond to. Just as the Centre-Left had to evolve to respond to the New Right, so the Right now has to work within a framework that includes the social changes, policies and values set out by the Centre-Left Third Way.

So the Third Way is a living issue. This book has a number of distinctive ways of making sense of this. As its sub-title suggests, it is not a book that just lays out the contours of the Third Way: it also interrogates its origins in social theories and social change – and in doing so some chapters debunk popular assumptions about the sources for Third Way ideas. It is not just about meanings of the Third Way – although Barrientos and Powell lay out some of the perspectives on this in the opening chapter – but also about alleged influences on why the Third Way has become what it is – with the emphasis on ‘alleged’, given the debunking just mentioned. There are some suggestions, for instance, that influences like globalisation are posited to justify certain policies or that the social changes identified by the Third Way are open to alternative normative conclusions.

The book is neither an apology for the Third Way, nor a litany of criticisms of it. In fact, it is a healthy mix of criticism and defence, some chapters attempting to provide a balanced discussion which combines both. Driver, and McCullen and Harris, for instance, defend some aspects of the Third Way for its social democratic elements – in Driver’s case looking at New Labour and in McCullen and Harris’s case at the Third Way theorist Anthony Giddens. But in neither of these chapters is there an uncritical endorsement of the Third Way – both provide a complex and balanced picture of its merits and limits. Other chapters question the Third Way’s own account of its influences or cast doubt on the veracity of its discourse. Is it as communitarian as it says it is (Hale)? Is communitarianism a disguise for something else – the abandoning of equality or the endorsement of neo-liberalism, for instance (Goes, Cammack, Morrison)? Is the Third Way as pragmatic about getting the best results as it claims to be (Shaw)? How decisive are the social changes identified by third-wayers in endorsing the political programme they lay out (Leggett)? There is a mix of defence, criticism and questioning in this book.

Some of the chapters draw out the implications on what futures there may be for, or after, or as an alternative to, the Third Way. Barrientos and Powell lay out

the varieties of routes left open by Third Way advocacies – there are many Third Ways not one and this leaves open the possibility of different political alternatives. McCullen and Harris suggest a greater egalitarianism that would be needed to achieve the suggested ends of Giddens's Third Way. Hale's critique points to the possibility of an alternative *real* communitarianism. Cammack's demolition of Third Way discourse implies a more radical alternative, and Leggett looks at the social changes posited by the strategists of the Third Way and how those changes may be analysed so as to lead to different political conclusions. This book is as much about the future of, and alternatives for and to, the Third Way as it is about how the Third Way has been thus far. It combines description and analysis with explanation and normative perspectives.

The book is also interdisciplinary. It does not take a purely political science approach which looks at party systems, organisations, political institutions or elections; but it is also not simply an analysis of ideas or policy, although these are discussed. The book includes contributions from people who work and research in departments of business studies, government and politics, sociology, social policy, and social and political thought. The Third Way is a complex phenomenon that is of concern to all of these disciplines. This is reflected here in the analysis of the Third Way, not just *between* chapters but often *within* them.

The style of writing throughout is accessible and often lively. The book includes outlines of key issues about the Third Way – including problems of definition – which will be of interest both to newcomers to the field and to students of diverse disciplines. But it also questions some commonly held assumptions about the Third Way and takes the field forward in some new and original ways, especially on questions of criticisms, futures and alternatives. This is a book, in style and content, which is important for both students and experts.

Part I introduces the key themes and some of the main interpretations of what the Third Way is (or 'are' as some contributors see it more as a plural phenomenon) and the routes down which it may be going. Part II looks at issues concerning economic equality. Driver, and McCullen and Harris discuss the egalitarian potential in the Third Way, whether that of New Labour or of Anthony Giddens. Shaw assesses the Third Way's attempt to combine public and private provision in the public services.

Two major themes of the Third Way are those just mentioned – the question of the continuing status of equality in the Third Way, and whether it has been shelved in preference for something else such as equality of opportunity, inclusiveness or community; and the question of the Third Way's pragmatism over private or public provision. Another important theme in advocacies and discussions of the Third Way has been that of community – the Third Way as a communitarian project intended to be an antidote to the individualism or rights-claiming of the New Right and the Old Left, respectively. In Part III, Hale, Goes and Prideaux discuss the Third Way's community – casting doubt on whether it is actually communitarian, whether communitarianism is a justification for something else and whether New Labour's communitarianism really is

true to the roots it claims in the thought of people like John Macmurray and Amita Etzioni.

Part IV analyses the discourse of the Third Way and offers some concluding arguments about what the book's contributors have said. One of the main criticisms of the Third Way is that it makes use of a lot of rhetoric to disguise a lack of substance or at least that its substance is other than that which it claims. Morrison and Cammack make such arguments, in particular that Third Way discourses are a disguise for a more neo-liberal project than they appear on the rhetorical surface. Will Leggett concludes that there is more to the Third Way than just such a smokescreen: critics should take the Third Way seriously, but should look for alternative, more radical, political strategies based on the social transformations it identifies.

Notes

- 1 We are grateful to the Centre for Critical Social Theory at the University of Sussex for supporting this conference.
- 2 Although, in Germany, *opposing* attacks on Iraq helped win votes for the SPD and the Greens.