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## Reaching across the Atlantic: Ideological Aspiration and Institutional Constraints in the United States and Britain

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On hearing that George W. Bush had won, or at least almost won, the American presidential election of November 2000, the British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook welcomed his victory warmly. There was nothing unusual in that itself; foreign secretaries always welcome incoming foreign leaders with whom they will have to work. But the content of the welcome was far more surprising. For Cook argued that although there had been differences between the British Labour Party and the Republican Party of George W. Bush in the past, the causes of such disagreements were now largely at an end. President Bush's 'compassionate conservatism', Cook continued, entailed that Bush's Republicans were closer to British New Labour than they were to the British Conservative Party. There had been a pattern of ideological convergence over recent years, the Foreign Secretary implied. As British Labour had learnt the electoral lessons of Bill Clinton's 'New Democrats' and moved from the left to the centre, so Mr Bush, in turn, had moved his Republican Party from the right to the centre in the pursuit of a response to the Clinton team's continued success.<sup>1</sup>

This was probably one of the more surprising, not to say ludicrous, of the welcomes that Bush enjoyed. It was presumably motivated far more by a sense of realpolitik than by ideological conviction for, as any reader of this book should know, the policy differences between the British Labour Party and the American Republicans are, and will in all likelihood remain, widely divergent. Yet, nonetheless, there remains

something instructive in this welcome. It clearly illustrates the ways in which politicians in Britain and the United States continue to interact with each other, commenting not only on international affairs and the economic interests of their states but seeking also to compare their respective domestic programmes and to find potential connections. Such a pattern in itself is far from new or unimportant. Throughout the twentieth century, British and American politicians, activists and intellectuals have continuously exchanged ideas and opinions. Many, indeed, have believed that they were constructing transatlantic programmes of reform, arguing in a number of cases that early developments in one society act as predictor to later developments in the other. Despite the frequency and occasional intensity of these exchanges, however, they have generally not played any significant role in the scholarly accounts of the politics and history of the United States. Indeed, at least until fairly recently, most academic commentators have sought to explain America's political development with almost no reference to the role of outside interlocutors. For many such scholars looking at outsiders would automatically invite mistake, for the United States is said to follow an 'exceptional' path primarily shaped by its distinctive political and social structures. Its historic codified constitution, opportunities for social mobility, constantly growing ethnic diversity, unsurpassed economic strength, and culture of individualism all marking out its development as distinctive in comparison to European states in general and to Britain in particular.<sup>2</sup>

There is, then, a conflict between the perspectives of active participants and distanced scholars. On the one hand, those who have been involved in the transatlantic exchange have often claimed that their dialogue holds the secret of future political development. On the other hand, most academics generally conclude that these exchanges of ideas have appeared more important to the participants than they really have been, for few, if any, have had any significant impact on the politics of the United States. This chapter examines both of these claims by closely analysing two key moments of exchange. To make comparison easier, the chapter looks at two events in the history of the relationship between the political parties and ideologues of the 'progressive' centre and left in Britain and the United States, one at the beginning of the twentieth century and one at its end. In examining the strengths and weaknesses of these exchanges, it shows how this mismatch of attitudes between political actors – who believe that their exchanges can have an important effect – and academic commentators – who believe those exchanges are inevitably limited in their impact – has actually been of some important consequence itself. It has, that is, been the cause not only of substantial analytic confusion but also of some real and concrete political

mistakes. Across the last hundred years, it will be shown, politicians have tended to overlook the sorts of arguments that academics make about the distinctive social and political environment of the US, but in so doing, the mistakes they have made have not been without important political consequences. If this analysis is correct, then we can conclude that a closer comparative study of the causes of political change in the United States should be helpful for both political actors and for those seeking better scholarly explanations.

### **From Britain to the United States: Building an American Labour Party**

In February 1918, the British Labour Party published a draft of its first real manifesto, entitled *Labour and the New Social Order*. It has long been noted that the document marked a turning point in British politics, marking as it did the end of one two-party system and the beginning of another. It is far less frequently recalled, however, that its significant impact was not confined to Britain alone. The draft manifesto caused comment and discussion throughout the developed world and the most striking of these international responses was the welcome accorded to it by those on the left of mainstream American politics, the progressives. Their response was clearly symbolized by the weekly magazine, the *New Republic*, which reprinted the draft manifesto in its entirety within days of its British publication, along with these words:

Many American readers who are accustomed to the timidities and tepidity of American progressivism will shrink from the drastic character of much of the proposed social and financial legislation. But they must harden themselves . . . The British Labor party has lifted quantitative socialism of the kind long advocated by the Fabian Society up to the level of immediate political discussion . . . It will go ill with us unless a party is formed in America which will formulate and fight for a program of American reconstruction which, however different from . . . [this] document, will at least not fall below it in courageous, scientific and thorough-going radicalism.<sup>3</sup>

The *New Republic* was far from alone in the United States in embracing *Labour and the New Social Order* in this way. The other leading American progressive journals – *Survey*, *The Public* and the *Independent* – all enthusiastically endorsed the British Labour Party’s new statement of purpose.<sup>4</sup> The building of a political party out of the massed forces

of organized labour, with a programme apparently penned by the Fabian Society, these organs of progressive opinion uniformly concluded, was 'quite the most promising political and social enterprise taking place in the world of today'.<sup>5</sup> The *New Republic's* positive welcome of the manifesto was not isolated nor was it short-lived. For several years following the end of the First World War, a large number of leading progressive intellectuals, especially those who had previously shaped the 'New Nationalism' of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party, demanded the creation in the United States of an independent political party based on the model of the British Labour Party. 'The time has come', these American progressive intellectuals insisted, for the American trade unions 'to go into politics'.<sup>6</sup> This demand may have found its apotheosis in the response accorded to *Labour and the New Social Order* but it was reiterated well into the 1920s.

This commitment, although appearing surprising to many latter-day commentators, was rooted in almost a decade of close interconnection. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century there had been a continuous exchange of ideas between the British Fabian socialists, including Sidney Webb, the author of Labour's constitution, and a group of American reformers called the 'nationalist progressives', who included the *New Republic's* editors Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl. Through a continual dialogue conducted in person, in academic journals and in shared political weeklies, both groups came to the view that their societies were blighted with the same essential problem: the arrival of serious class conflict. During the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, both groups argued, the overwhelming characteristic of Britain and the United States had become the 'clamour, bewilderment' and 'almost tremulous unrest' of class tension.<sup>7</sup> Such a challenge found its clearest expression in the exponential growth of a trade union movement that appeared to be challenging the very foundations of the predominant political and social order. British trade union membership increased by more than 250 per cent from 1890 to the outbreak of the First World War, and it doubled again during the conflict itself. In the United States, the growth was more dramatic still. There was a fivefold expansion of American union membership during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century alone.<sup>8</sup> And with the increase in size came an increase in militancy. All the major industries of the new economy – coal-mining, iron and steel production, railroad transport – were almost continually racked with discord and, in the United States at least, that discord was often violent. No politically engaged thinker could ignore it; the strength and discontent of organized labour was, it seemed, daily 'forced upon the attention of the public at

large'.<sup>9</sup> 'The sword of class consciousness is being whetted,' Walter Weyl argued, and unless reform was quickly undertaken 'its sharp edge will cut clean through the body social, sundering us into two mutually antagonistic groups.'<sup>10</sup>

These British Fabians and American nationalist progressives both desired positively to respond to this crisis without embracing its potentially revolutionary extreme. They also agreed on the general outline of a solution. The avoidance of dangerous class struggle, both argued, was dependent on the enhancement of genuine social union and national harmony which could itself only be attained through purposeful government action. 'Social progress', Walter Weyl contended, entailed that all should be 'ordered, not jumbled, not left to the clash of egoistic interests'.<sup>11</sup> Across the Atlantic, Sidney Webb outlined an identical philosophy. 'Where our forefathers' relied on 'a jostling crowd of individuals each fighting for his own hand', the new generation desired 'a highly organized, far-reaching, patiently pursued communal enterprise'.<sup>12</sup> These general commitments led to two particular demands: there was an urgent need for a concerted government involvement in economic decision-making and for the construction of a substantial welfare state. Both groups thus dedicated themselves 'to a drastic reorganization of the . . . political and economic system. To the substitution of a frank social policy for the individualism of the past and the realization of this policy . . . by the use of efficient governmental instruments.'<sup>13</sup> While involving the government in industry and moving material resources from the rich to the poor could 'superficially be called class legislation', the *New Republic* thus argued, its essential justification for the British Fabians and the American nationalist progressives lay elsewhere. Any effort to improve the standing of the least well off should be considered because it 'seeks to remove the obstacles to national unity'.<sup>14</sup>

It was out of this ideal that the ideological justification for building a Labour Party emerged. Constructing a political party out of the massed ranks of the organized workers would assist in two essential ways. First, it would encourage the workers themselves to abandon any potentially revolutionary tactics and also lead them to move from a simple concern with their own interest to a more rounded interest in the community as a whole. If workers were to form their own party, it was thus continually argued, they would be led by the realities of democratic coalition building to 'assume the responsibility for adapting their class program and needs to those of the other classes and to that of the community as a whole'.<sup>15</sup> Direct political involvement would thus move the workers from sectionalism to communalism. In this way, these ideal Labour parties would also possess the advantage of being directed not by class-

conscious workers but by removed, impartial experts, by, in other words, Fabians or the nationalist progressives themselves. Second, the arrival of a party of labour would also make the state itself far more likely to pursue the necessary reforming agenda. For even if the Labour Party did not attain power outright, its presence in elections and in the legislature would exert a powerful influence on others. There was, of course, also a clear electoral motivation here. Both Fabians and nationalist progressives had previously been dependent on the good-will of alternative political parties: mainly the Liberals in Britain and the Republicans in the United States. Increasingly, however, they felt let down by their chosen partisan vehicles and longed for an alternative of their own. The arrival of a mass working-class electorate and a powerful organized trade union movement seemed to bring that within reach.

For all its ideological attractiveness to American progressives, however, this demand was destined to remain unfulfilled in the United States for one very simple reason. Whereas the ideal and aspiration were shared across the Atlantic, the actual political situation in the United States differed greatly from that in Britain. In Britain, politics in the early twentieth century was already characterized by the emergence of a union-dominated Labour Party, equipped with resources and supporters, whose policy-making processes could be easily permeated by dedicated intellectual activists; in the United States the situation could not have been more sharply divergent. There, however much progressive ideologists desired it, it quickly became clear that the American trade union movement felt little need or desire for a partisan reorganization. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), led by Samuel Gompers, had always been suspicious of political engagement, believing, among other things, that the vast divisions among the American working class – cleavages of ethnicity, region and skill – would always prevent the development of any sustained sense of common involvement necessary for successful political endeavour. Even those few unions who were interested in pursuing the Labour Party ideal found their path blocked by several peculiar features of American political life. The Chicago Federation of Labor attempted to establish a National Labor Party which ‘frankly admit[ted] its kinship to the British Labour Party’ in November 1918 in an explicit challenge to the AFL’s formal apolitical stance.<sup>16</sup> But despite high-level progressive expectations that such an organization would have ‘an excellent chance of capturing the White House’, the party failed to make any significant headway.<sup>17</sup> Unsuccessful in its attempt to persuade the left-leaning Senator Robert La Follette to stand as its candidate for the presidency, it ran in 1920 as a Farmer-Labor party with the relatively unknown attorney Parley Parker Christensen at its head. It

polled only 290,000 votes, less than half the amount that the imprisoned radical Eugene Debs won for an American Socialist Party which had itself been severely weakened by the First World War.<sup>18</sup>

There were so many reasons for this failure – institutional, cultural, economic – that latter-day scholars have often described the failure of the Labour Party ideal in the United States as almost ‘overdetermined’. Sifting through the various explanations for the lack of a political party of organized labour in America – explanations that range from the peculiarly exclusive nature of American trade unionism to the role of the Supreme Court in restricting the scope of legislative action in the United States – has thus become a staple of recent scholarship.<sup>19</sup> What united them, however, was that they were all distinctive and characteristic features of American politics and society. Whatever the precise causes, then, it is clear that all efforts at building a party of organized labour were always destined to come to nothing in the United States whereas such a party was perfectly well suited to conditions in Great Britain. The essential problem facing this effort, then, was that the transatlantic dialogue had – for reasons we shall return to shortly – taken almost no notice of ingrained local peculiarities. Fabians and nationalist progressives had collectively built up an ideal theory in glorious isolation from the political realities of their two very distinctive polities. The result, unsurprisingly, was intellectual success and, in the United States at least, political failure.

### **From the United States to Britain: The Third Way and the ‘New’ Approach to Progressive Politics**

In the aftermath of the failure of the American Labor Party experiment, there were to be few serious attempts to forge a transatlantic agreement on progressive political strategy, even though there were continual discussions of individual policies, for eighty years. In April 1999, though, the *New Democrat* published an account of transatlantic political exchange that was just as dramatic in its own way as the *New Republic’s* coverage of eighty years earlier. In the White House earlier that month, Democratic President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair had met together with other Western European leaders publicly to celebrate the construction of a ‘new international public philosophy’. In a meeting dubbed ‘the Third Way Homecoming’, the President contended that ‘Third Way thinking’ was ‘reshaping progressive politics’ in both the United States and Britain.<sup>20</sup> The British centre-

left itself was in no doubt that this view was right. 'A unifying thread of ideology runs throughout the changes we are making,' Tony Blair argued in a speech at the State Department in Washington DC. 'There is a new radical-centre being born' in Britain and 'when I spell out the key themes' there will clearly 'be familiar echoes to what you are doing here'.<sup>21</sup> Among those academics adding a scholarly gloss to this political enthusiasm were the American communitarian philosopher Amitai Etzioni and Anthony Giddens, ironically head of the most impressive monument to the British Fabianism of old, the London School of Economics.<sup>22</sup>

In its most ambitious form, the Third Way was intended to be a new approach to politics itself. The *New Democrat* argued that it was best characterized by three essential principles: 'the idea that government should promote equal opportunity for all while granting special privilege for none; an ethic of mutual responsibility that equally rejects the politics of entitlement and the politics of social abandonment; and a new approach to governing that empowers citizens to act for themselves.'<sup>23</sup> The essence of these principles themselves becomes clearer when it is appreciated that they were premised on one further idea; all the Third Way advocates believed that the old reformist techniques no longer provided effective means to the attainment of progressives' desired goals. Simple observation, it was thus argued, demonstrated that poverty and inequality had failed to be eliminated either by the initial welfare efforts of Franklin Roosevelt or Clement Attlee or by the later fine-tunings of Lyndon Johnson and Harold Wilson.<sup>24</sup> The economic difficulties of the late 1970s and early 1980s further put paid to the interventionist basis of earlier progressive macroeconomic policy, and the effective collapse of the trade union movement in both nations had further added to the need to find a new direction for economic policy. It was necessary, Third Way advocates thus claimed, to stand midway between the espousal of market mechanisms that characterized much of the politics of the 1980s and the faith in large-scale state intervention that had been characteristic of left-leaning politics at least since the First World War. The essence of that alternative strategy lay in resisting the call for the straightforward expansion of government intervention, and crafting instead a closer working relationship between the public and the private sectors. Voluntary agencies, community activists and private firms should thus be brought into the heart of many areas of public provision, while the large bureaucracies of old would be dramatically pared down. These techniques, it was argued, would guarantee that 'fundamental progressive principles' are 'furthered by modern means and innovative ideas'.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to this intellectual reasoning, the emergence of the Third Way was also driven by an explicit political calculation. The early

twentieth-century efforts at intellectual and political exchange had also had an electoral dimension, of course, but whereas those earlier ambitions were born of optimism about the direction of social change, late twentieth-century views were shaped by pessimism. For most of the 1980s, both the United States and Britain had been subject to continuous and relatively radical right-wing governments. Throughout that time, political commentators on both sides of the Atlantic had also begun to worry that the old coalition of electoral support that both parties had relied on was breaking down. The very working class who had provided the backbone of electoral support for progressive endeavours was both shrinking and losing its homogeneous pattern of partisan allegiance. Increasing opportunities for social mobility apparently characterized both societies and, especially as these opportunities were attended by further demographic shifts, this made it increasingly unlikely that either the Democrats or Labour could happily rely on the simple majorities of old.<sup>26</sup> These trends had been notable for far longer in the United States than in Britain, accompanying the election of Richard Nixon there and not really emerging in Britain until almost a decade later. They were, on the other hand, felt more fiercely in Britain than the United States, as class had always played a more significant role in shaping British political allegiances. The Third Way offered a way out for both the Democrats and British Labour, intellectually and politically. Parties of the left, Third Way advocates argued, should continue to appeal to the remaining sections of the working class and to the economically disadvantaged, while at the same time incorporating the needs and values of the newly affluent and the traditional middle class. The question that remained was how to combine the two groups.

Rhetorically this was to be achieved by continually emphasizing the essential 'commonality of values' between these two groups, in a manner not dissimilar to earlier patterns.<sup>27</sup> In concrete terms, though, it entailed developing policy instruments that were capable of responding to the economic and social interests of both sections, and avoiding the use of those that might cause more difficulty.<sup>28</sup> This entailed, in particular, that Democrats and Labour abandon the bold objectives of the past that might alienate many potential voters. Third Way advocates urged the parties to move strongly away from any explicit efforts to redistribute wealth from rich to poor, via a traditional tax-and-benefits system, or to direct economic affairs from the centre. At the same time, it led both parties to seek improvements (and usually gradual ones) in the sorts of public services that might benefit old and new electoral constituencies alike; it was for this reason that health and education were both granted a central role. It still further entailed abandoning the active

social agenda suggested by the cultural liberalism that was popular largely among committed activists, and embracing instead a firm style of cultural conservatism – tough on crime, demanding on welfare recipients, tentative on race – whose appeal was believed to cross class boundaries.<sup>29</sup> Combining these two themes, representatives of both Democratic and Labour parties even used the same language in continually committing themselves to serve the interests of those ‘ordinary people who worked hard, played by the rules, and took responsibility for their own actions’.<sup>30</sup>

This looked on the surface like a spectacular international change of direction, beginning in 1992 with the election of Bill Clinton in the United States. After successfully capturing the White House and even managing to hold on to both Houses of Congress in that year, Clinton initially pursued what he described as the ‘New Democratic agenda’, later to be dubbed the Third Way, almost to the letter. Two years later, Tony Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party in Britain and, in clear emulation of Clinton, rebranded it ‘New Labour’. In addition to adopting the broad policy agenda outlined by Third Way advocates on both sides of the Atlantic, Blair’s Labour Party also employed the polling and presentational techniques that had characterized the New Democrat approach. Blair ‘modernizers’ adopted the Machiavellian internal politicking of the Clinton Democratic Leadership Council, ousting opponents and relying on broad appeals to public opinion rather than building up party activist support to forward his agenda, and relied heavily on the increasingly professional experts of political communications for advice. In office, indeed, Blair readily embraced the Clinton role, preferring to style himself in the manner of President rather than Prime Minister.<sup>31</sup> The celebrations by the *New Democrat* of a Third Way hegemony in Britain and the United States did not appear to be out of place.

Yet, despite all of this, it is already clear by the outset of the twenty-first century that the Third Way has failed to build a genuine transatlantic political order. It has also failed, to varying degrees, in both the United States and Britain. And, just as eighty years ago, the essential cause lies in the failure of the two groups to appreciate and to respond to the entrenched institutional and social differences of the two societies in which they operate. The American Third Way vision was explicitly designed for an institutional order where policy success was extremely difficult. For most of his administration, Bill Clinton faced a divided government. His first two years of office were the only time when he could have expected a legislative agenda to succeed. Even then, however, his efforts to introduce a complex form of universal health care provi-

sion failed to overcome not public hostility – there was indeed wide public support – but entrenched institutional obstacles. Attempts also to reform education stumbled on the simple institutional reality that the American federal government has very little effective control over educational provision. In so far as the Third Way survived at all, therefore, it was because it was peculiarly well suited to an institutional environment which made policy innovation extremely difficult. As a public philosophy that committed its advocates to relatively little in the form of concrete reform, it could just about sustain itself in such an environment but it could not hope to be able to promise solutions to remaining social problems in the long run.<sup>32</sup>

The situation in Britain was equally difficult, but for dramatically different reasons. Faced with a uniform system of government and far less regular elections, British voters were left with a stark choice in 1997: they had effectively to choose one-party government for another four years. In making that choice, there was little surprise that they turned their back entirely on a Conservative Party increasingly characterized by sleaze and managerial incompetence. The result was an overwhelming parliamentary majority for Blair. But Blair's majority presented problems to the 'do-nothing' mentality of the Third Way, a mentality which had been peculiarly well suited to the institutional conditions of the United States. For, in reality, Blair was presented with significant opportunities for reform, his parliamentary majority far outstripping that of all three of twentieth-century Britain's most reform-minded prime ministers, Herbert Asquith, Margaret Thatcher and Clement Attlee. His attempted answer partly lay in an attempt to avoid commitment. As Hugo Young has argued, 'Tony Blair had two objectives during the election. The first was to win, the second was to minimize every expectation of what would happen then. He wanted to over-perform, but under-promise.'<sup>33</sup> This was, however, an unsustainable scenario in the long run. There was a limit to how persuasive a British government would ever seem in claiming that it was incapable of responding to remaining social, and especially infrastructural, problems. It was as such that the last years of the first New Labour administration witnessed continual demands from many diverse groups for a return to at least some of the policies of old. Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer was thus widely held to be courting the abandonment of the Third Way and a return to a more identifiably British form of social democracy.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the electoral appeal of 'New Labour', the politics of the transatlantic Third Way provided no straightforward answer to the peculiar difficulties with which Britain was faced.

## Convergence and the Limits of Adaptability

To many outside the immediate circle of both of these movements, the failure of both efforts to craft a genuinely transatlantic political agenda did not come as much of a surprise. A large number of politicians and an even larger number of intellectuals have consistently warned of the potential problems and difficulties involved in attempting to borrow ideas and political strategies directly from one society to another. In the early twentieth century, for example, the leaders of the American Federation of Labor itself insisted that radical politicians in the United States should stay away from attempting to politicize its activities even if such approaches had appeared successful elsewhere. In the last months of the First World War, Matthew Woll, deputy leader of the AFL, specifically enjoined progressives not to try to follow the British model. 'We must not be unmindful', Woll argued, 'of the fact that our domestic problems are quite different from those found to exist in Great Britain.'<sup>35</sup> Although Woll's and the AFL's arguments could be attributed to the organization's innate opposition to the idea of party political engagement, friendly and informed critics also raised objections. Worried by signs of an unstable ideological export, Edward Pease of the British Fabian Society argued long before the end of the war that 'America must not borrow . . . Fabianism from England, but must create its own Socialism to suit its own political and social and industrial conditions.'<sup>36</sup> The same voices of concern were heard during the Third Way project, although they were rather more muted. *Tribune* the voice of the left wing of the Labour Party continually warned against the 'Americanization' of British Labour, suggesting that it was an inappropriate model to follow in the current circumstances.

The failure of both groups to heed these warnings and their desire to jump right into potentially dangerous transatlantic alliances requires careful explanation. The answer is surprisingly similar in both historical cases. For both the progressives of the early twentieth century and the Third Way advocates of the century's end constructed a narrative of *convergence* to account for their decision to overlook protestations of differences. Both groups, that is, argued that the United States and Britain were inevitably beginning to resemble one another in fundamental social and political ways, and it was that resemblance that excused the decision to ignore apparently entrenched differences.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the American nationalist progressives argued that it was Britain that was more advanced along a single trajectory for Western civilization, a trajectory provided most

clearly by the growth and radicalism of the industrial working class.<sup>37</sup> All industrial societies, it was argued, were faced with essentially the same dilemma – how to maintain social harmony and stability in the face of ever-increasing class tension – and would thus have to seek essentially similar solutions. As Britain had industrialized earlier, as the popular industrial correspondent Ordway Tead put it in 1918, the ‘peculiar advantage of drawing on the English experience’ was thus that ‘we see England a little ahead of us on the road that the capitalistic system is travelling.’<sup>38</sup> Even the leading political scientist of the day, Harold Laski, generally so astute an observer of irrevocable differences between Britain and the United States, occasionally fell into the trap of perceiving social progress according to a linear chronology. The underlying problem for progressives trying to politicize American unions, he once insisted, was simply that the American Federation of Labor ‘is in social ideas . . . a generation behind the English labor movement.’<sup>39</sup>

In the late twentieth century, this narrative of convergence was maintained, but the pattern was reversed. Now it was the United States which was further ahead and Britain which was inevitably forced to catch up. Moreover, where convergence theory in the past was used to justify the inevitable growth of government intervention, in the late twentieth century it was employed to justify the inevitable withdrawal of the government from key sectors of economic and social life. As such, British Third Way advocates have thus been found arguing that a series of structural changes in British politics have called into question the very possibility of a more interventionist politics. These changes are most frequently described in the language of ‘globalization’. The increasing mobility of global capital, it is thus argued, entails that only nations with relatively low tax burdens and non-interventionist governments will be able to maintain reasonable levels of investment and thus of economic growth. Capital, it is argued, will only locate to those societies governed by those committed to ‘fiscal responsibility, prudence and a rules-bounded economic policy’.<sup>40</sup> The United States, then, which holders of capital apparently believe already largely fits this bill, must almost inevitably become the model, and not only for Britain but for the rest of the world. All countries, Blair and his allies thus argue, should be led to ‘ratchet down’ once ambitious progressive programmes of government action.<sup>41</sup> The Third Way, with its minimal ambitions and its reliance on non-governmental forms of intervention, is not simply one option among others, it is the *only* means of maintaining any form of workable progressive commitment.<sup>42</sup>

Both these narratives of inevitable convergence no doubt have some truth in them. It would be mistaken to argue that class was not a central

issue in early twentieth-century politics, and equally misleading simply to claim that globalization posed no difficulties to interventionist administrations at the century's close. These are not, however, the only reasons for the adoption of such a narrative. Their first advantage is that they provide those engaged in transatlantic exchange with an excuse for overlooking the peculiarities of their own society. For if nations are converging, it seems to be claimed, there is no need to attend to the very real differences that currently exist. Moreover, the *inevitability* involved in both these narratives is designed to ensure that ideologues remain immune from any of the problems their own theories throw up. For if their ideas are the unavoidable consequence of immutable social change then there is little way in which they can be held accountable for the shortcomings. The ease of their own personal transatlantic academic engagement undoubtedly also contributed to the apparent inability of these groups to notice how deeply entrenched were the social and institutional differences that obtained between their two countries. Working together intellectually with their British allies, the editors of *New Republic* reported in 1918, had revealed to them that 'the problems confronting Britain are essentially the same as the problems confronting America.' As the wartime crisis gathered steam, that same intellectual exchange convinced them that the problems of the new world could thus be resolved 'only as [they are] being worked out in Great Britain'.<sup>43</sup> The same could no doubt be said of reformers in the later period. As *they* had become closer as the years went by, these British and American political theorists seemed to suggest, so inevitably their *societies* would follow suit.

Whatever its root cause, this faith in convergence has crowded out any careful analysis of actual institutional and social differences between the two countries in both cases. As the First World War reached its conclusion, the progressive theorists of the *New Republic* often argued that there were no 'political . . . barriers to cooperation' across the Atlantic, and no barriers therefore to the easy adaptation of measures originating in one country to the circumstances of another.<sup>44</sup> Instead, of course, they simply failed to recognize how firmly entrenched these obstacles actually were. As the AFL's deputy leader Matthew Woll argued, to many of 'those who have come to be styled as advanced thinkers . . . the complete reformation of the world's social order may be readily secured simply by the formation of a labor party directed and led, of course, by the self-same intellectuals and advanced thinkers.' These thinkers, he continued, apparently believe that the long list of institutional, social and economic obstacles that in fact prevent that development 'may be easily swept aside as if by the waving of a magic wand'.<sup>45</sup> Although Woll's self-satisfied

rhetoric jars even these eighty years later, his basic conclusion remains justified nonetheless. To put all that has gone before another way, where Daniel Rodgers argues that in ‘talking about Britain’ these progressive intellectuals were ‘thinking about America’, he would be advised rather to suggest that while talking about Britain, these progressives *ought* to have been thinking about America.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

It is not always thus. The mistake of the early twentieth century did not fail to be instructive. A generation later the American theorists that helped to shape and legitimate the programmes of the New Deal learnt relatively quickly the necessity of being constantly aware of the opportunities and limitations posed by their own social, institutional and economic environment. After a few early difficulties, they shaped an ideological vision that was broadly compatible with those constraints but which was radical nonetheless. They pulled the system as far as it would go without ever really attempting to break it.<sup>47</sup> Such an approach is vital to the success of progressive politics and it is for that reason that we have much to learn from the study of comparative politics and the individual study of politics that are foreign to us. For such scholarly investigation should best be used to remind us not only what countries have in common – although that is important – but also what distinguishes them. Such an emphasis has long been a key element of the very best scholarly analysis and it has occasionally percolated into politics too. In observing international labour developments just before the First World War broke out, another participant in that same Anglo-American progressive exchange, G. D. H. Cole, sagely noted that ‘the American movement is as characteristically American as ours is characteristically English.’ From this observation, Cole drew the conclusion that many activists in his own time and hence have appeared to miss. ‘It is a truth to be remembered’, he argued, ‘that institutions are born and not made.’ And as such, the ‘greatest service that can be done us by the intelligent study of foreign’ politics ‘is to save us at least from becoming cosmopolitans’.<sup>48</sup>

## NOTES

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- 1 As reported on [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk\\_politics/newsid\\_1009000/1009633.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk_politics/newsid_1009000/1009633.stm)
- 2 For excellent overviews of these trends see Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and David Englander (ed.), *Britain and America: Studies in Comparative History 1760–1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For notable exceptions to the general trend see Peter Hall, *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism across Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and Desmond King, *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in Britain and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 3 Editors, 'Labour and the New Social Order', Supplement to *New Republic*, 16 Feb. 1918, p. 1.
- 4 See Paul U. Kellogg, 'The British Labor Offensive', *Survey*, 2 Mar. 1918, pp. 585–8 and, for an overview, John A. Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 208–32.
- 5 Editors, 'The Rising Tide of British Labor', *New Republic*, 19 Dec. 1923, p. 82.
- 6 Editors, 'Labor in Politics', *New Republic*, 19 Nov. 1919, p. 336.
- 7 Walter Weyl, *The New Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), p. 1.
- 8 See Gary Marks, *Unions in Politics: Britain, Germany and the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 83–5 and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1997).
- 9 Arthur Gleason, *What the Workers Want: A Study of British Labor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), p. 5 and Charles Beard, 'Introduction', in Savel Zimmand (ed.), *Modern Social Movements: Descriptive Summaries and Bibliographies* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1921). For an overview, see David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- 10 Walter Weyl, *Tired Radicals and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), pp. 24–5.

- 11 Walter Weyl, 'From Chaos to City', MS in the Walter Weyl Papers, Rutgers University Library, Special Collections, box 2, folder 7, p. 2.
- 12 Sidney Webb, *The Principles of the Labour Party* (London: Labour Party, 1918), p. 4.
- 13 Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 15.
- 14 Editors, 'The Nationalism of the British Labour Party', *New Republic*, 17 Apr. 1918, pp. 63–5.
- 15 Editors, 'Labour in Politics', *New Republic*, 15 Mar. 1922, p. 336. See too 'Why a Labor Party?', *New Republic*, 26 Apr. 1919, p. 399 and 'A New National Party', 24 Mar. 1920, pp. 108–11, and Ordway Tead, 'A National Labor Policy', *New Republic*, 17 Nov. 1917, pp. 67–9.
- 16 Editors, 'The Labor Party', *Survey*, 13 Dec. 1919, p. 229. See too, Editors, 'Independent Labor Party Launched', *Survey*, 30 Nov. 1918, pp. 264–5 and 'Growing Support for a Labor Party', *Survey*, 14 Dec. 1918, p. 354.
- 17 Frank P. Walsh cited in McCartin, *Labor's Great War*, p. 197.
- 18 See C. Merz, 'Enter: The Labor Party', *New Republic*, 10 Dec. 1919, pp. 53–5. On the Socialists, see James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).
- 19 Marks, *Unions in Politics* convincingly argues that the combination of the closed nature of American unions and the ethnic heterogeneity of the work-force limited the possibilities of political action on the part of organized labour. An explanation centred on the contrasting institutional character of Britain and America – and especially the supremacy of the judicial branch in the latter – is provided in Victoria C. Hattam, *Labour Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1992), pp. 205–43. Informed scepticism about this dominant form of explanation is present in Robin Archer, 'Unions, Courts, and Parties: Judicial Repression and Labor Politics in Late-Nineteenth-Century America', *Politics and Society*, 26, no. 3 (1998), pp. 391–442. An overview of all the various arguments can be found in Neville Kirk, *Labor and Society in Britain and the USA*, vol. 2 (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994), esp. pp. 246–62.
- 20 Editors, in *New Democrat*, 25 Apr. 1999, republished at [www.ndol.org](http://www.ndol.org)
- 21 Tony Blair, speech to State Department, 6 Feb. 1998, republished at [www.ndol.org](http://www.ndol.org)
- 22 See Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Crown, 1993) and Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).
- 23 'The Third Way: Progressive Governance for the 21st Century', *New Democrat*, 25 Apr. 1999, republished at [www.ndol.org](http://www.ndol.org)
- 24 For classic accounts of the early period, see among a voluminous literature, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1959) and Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For the later efforts at refinement

- see Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1996) and Michael Stewart, *The Jekyll and Hyde Years: Politics and Economic Policy since 1964* (London: Routledge, 1977).
- 25 Al From, 'The Third Way: Reshaping Politics throughout the World', *New Democrat*, 14 July 1999, republished at [www.ndol.org](http://www.ndol.org)
  - 26 See Ivor Crewe, Neil Day and Anthony Fox, *The British Electorate, 1963–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and W. E. Miller and S. A. Traugott, compilers, *American National Election Studies Data Handbook 1952–1986* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
  - 27 See Tony Blair, *Social-ism* (London: Fabian Society, 1994) and *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).
  - 28 See Margaret Weir, 'The Collapse of Bill Clinton's Third Way', in Stuart White (ed.), *New Labour: The Progressive Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 189.
  - 29 For the classic account of this dimension, see chapter 4 of Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1960). A detailed recent account is Byron E. Shafer and William J. M. Claggett, *The Two Majorities: The Issue Context of Modern American Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). For a comparative account, see Byron E. Shafer and Marc D. Stears, 'From Social Welfare to Cultural Values', *Journal of Policy History*, 11, no. 4 (1999), pp. 331–66.
  - 30 Bill J. Clinton, 'The New Covenant', speech to Georgetown University, 23 Oct. 1991, (republished at [www.ndol.org](http://www.ndol.org)). Compare with Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?* (London: Faber, 1996), pp. 6–8.
  - 31 For an authoritative statement of intent in this regard, see Mandelson and Liddle, *Blair Revolution*, pp. 232–55. See too C. Campbell and B. A. Rockman, 'Third Way Leadership, Old Way Government: Blair, Clinton, and the Power to Govern', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3, no. 1 (2001), p. 45.
  - 32 For a detailed account see Weir, 'Collapse of Bill Clinton's Third Way', pp. 137–48.
  - 33 Hugo Young cited in Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour: Labouring under False Pretences?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 133–4.
  - 34 See Hay, *Political Economy of New Labour*, *passim*.
  - 35 Matthew Woll, 'American Labor Readjustment Proposals', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 7 (1919), p. 181.
  - 36 Edward Pease, 'The Legislative Programme of the Socialist Party', *Fabian News*, Jan. 1914, p. 76.
  - 37 See Arthur Mann, 'British Social Thought and American Reformers of the Progressive Era', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 42 (1956), p. 691.
  - 38 Ordway Tead, 'The American Situation in War Time', *Century Magazine*, Jan. 1918, p. 355.

- 39 Harold Laski, 'Industrial Self-Government', *New Republic*, 27 Apr. 1918, p. 392. See too Harold Laski, 'British Labor and the War', *New Republic*, 23 July 1919, p. 400.
- 40 Colin Hay, 'The Invocation of External Economic Constraint', *European Legacy*, 6, no. 2 (2001), p. 238.
- 41 See Peter Seyd, 'Tony Blair and New Labour', in Anthony King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls: New Labour Triumphs* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1998).
- 42 For a full account of this vision see D. Coates, *Models of Capitalism: Growth and Stagnation in the Modern Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), esp. pp. 258–9 and Adam Przeworski and Michael Wallerstein, 'Structural Dependence of the State on Capital', *American Political Science Review*, 82, no. 1 (1998), pp. 11–29.
- 43 Editors, 'Towards Industrial Democracy', *New Republic* (1918), p. 123.
- 44 Melvyn Stokes, 'American Progressives and the European Left', *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (1983), p. 28.
- 45 Woll, 'American Labor', p. 182.
- 46 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 311.
- 47 See Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 37–62. As Brinkley argues at p. 62: 'By 1945 American liberals, as the result of countless small adaptations to a broad range of experiences, had reached an accommodation with capitalism that served in effect to settle many of the most divisive conflicts of the first decades of the century.'
- 48 G. D. H. Cole, *The World of Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 165.