

CHRISTOPHER KIRKLAND. *Labour's Economic Ideology since 1900: Developed through Crises*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022. Pp. 206. \$139.95 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2023.180

Political economy has profoundly shaped, and split, the British Labour Party since its birth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Labour's politicians and thinkers have long been obsessed with class inequality and divided over macroeconomic heterodoxy and the extent of public or social ownership. Yet, Labour's past economic debates are often poorly understood today, including in school classrooms, undergraduate seminars, and academic conferences. There is thus a clear rationale for a rigorous but accessible history of economic ideas and policy-making in the Labour Party. Christopher Kirkland's *Labour's Economic Ideology since 1900: Developed through Crises* is in this sense a welcome publication. However, flaws in its conception and execution currently prevent it from being an authoritative introduction.

Kirkland takes the reader on a brisk race through Labour's debates about the economy from its 1900 foundation to its 2019 general election defeat under Jeremy Corbyn. To keep the book manageable, he sensibly draws mainly from a wide range of classic texts (Ralph Miliband to Elizabeth Durbin) and contemporary scholarship, using primary texts only when useful. Exploring Labour's ideology through the theme of crisis, he moves from the 1901 Taff Vale judgment and the First World War (chapter 2) through the 1926 General Strike and the 1931 slump (chapter 3) to the Second World War and the 1947 convertibility crisis (chapter 4), the 1967 devaluation and the 1976 IMF loan (chapter 5), the 1980s electoral wilderness (chapter 6), the 2007–2008 Great Financial Crisis (chapter 7), and electoral defeats and Brexit in the 2010s (chapter 8).

Kirkland also focuses on four themes, described as “the relationship between power and ideology”; contested definitions of “socialism”; “the extent to which socialism . . . can be achieved through parliamentary means”; and Labour's relationship with the trade unions (6–8). However, Kirkland's execution of this schema plays is slightly different: in each chapter, alongside Labour's ideology, Labour's understanding of socialism, and the Labour Party and the trade unions, he discusses Labour's responses to crisis, not the debate over parliamentarism. This ambiguity over the four themes is an early sign of the book's issues.

Labour's Economic Ideology has undoubted strengths. Kirkland ably summarizes key developments and issues, from controversies over nationalization and socialism to the varying appeal of planning. He recognizes situational and structural constraints while also exploring how the meanings of orthodoxy and socialism are shaped through ideological debate. Particular arguments are convincing, such as the impact of the General Strike's failure on Labour's parliamentarism and the role 1931 had in forcing the party to explore its economics more systematically (chapter 3), or that the need for wider appeal pushed social-democratic revisionists into adopting broad definitions of socialism (chapter 4). Kirkland also reemphasizes an important pattern: when capitalism has faced genuine peril, Labour has sought to shore up existing capitalist structures, prioritizing the immediate welfare of the working classes over uncertain future utopias (95).

Nonetheless, parts of *Labour's Economic Ideology* are a missed opportunity. Firstly, Kirkland's use of key terms is not always convincing. Kirkland states that he aims to investigate “whether the party is ideological, pursuing an ultimate goal of creating a socialist society, or driven by electoral success” (6). This is a dubious definition of *ideology*: he seems to confuse it with particular (socialist) beliefs and fails to recognize that parliamentarism is, itself, an ideological commitment. Scholars do not have to agree on what *ideology* means. However, Kirkland's definition risks logical inconsistency. On one page, he suggests *both* that New Labour worked “under the ideology of the third way” *and* that “[r]ather than adopting an ideological approach, Labour was keen to demonstrate the scientific nature of its arguments” (129). He also illustrates New Labour's “scientific” rather than “ideological approach” with an

assertion of Gordon Brown's (supposed) reliance on the "Laffer curve" (129)—not obviously an unideological concept, given that it was developed by a former advisor to Ronald Reagan and co-author of *Trunponomics: Inside the America First Plan to Revive Our Economy* (Stephen Moore and Arthur B. Laffer, 2018). Similar skepticism could be expressed of Kirkland's working definition of *revisionism* given his argument that Anthony Crosland was "opposed to revisionism" in the 1970s (91).

Secondly, given the subject matter of economic ideology, there are some gaps in content. For one, Kirkland does not explain Labour's dramatic shift from supporting Edwardian free trade in the 1910s to extensive import protectionism in the 1940s and 1950s and then to championing hyperglobalization in the 1990s. There are other gaps: the recurring (and contested) claim that Labour should consciously embrace currency devaluation, New Labour's knowledge economy, and Ed Miliband's concept of predistribution. Kirkland discusses other key aspects only briefly, such as attacks on the Treasury's institutional power, the detail of the Alternative Economic Strategy, and the impact of deindustrialization. Kirkland clearly did not intend *Labour's Economic Ideology* to be exhaustive, but his arguments would have benefited from discussion of some of the above. Moreover, while leaving out or glossing over these subjects, Kirkland includes material not directly related to the subject matter, including diversions on the cultural debates during the Brexit referendum, and odd asides, such as that since 1992 Corbyn was the only leader of Labour or the Conservatives to remain after election defeat (139), which, by chronological design, ignores Clement Attlee (1951–1955), Edward Heath (1966–1970, 1974), Harold Wilson (1970–1974), and Neil Kinnock (1987–1992).

Thirdly, there are errors and potentially misleading points. For example, Kirkland states that leaving the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992 allowed for "further increases in interest rates" (107), and that Brown decided to "decentralise the Bank of England" in 1997 (133). Kirkland claims both that Labour's performance in the 2015 general election was 5 percent lower than in 2010 (it was actually 1.4 percent higher) and that in the subsequent leadership election Corbyn "owe[d] most of his support to registered supporters" (141) (registered supporters provided only 35 percent of Corbyn's support, with 48 percent coming from party members). Less importantly, but distractingly, there are some spelling mistakes, including "Atlee" (60, 62), and "Healy" (87).

Finally, the conclusions (161) do not all plausibly flow from the preceding discussion. Many would completely agree with Kirkland that "Old Labour" is not a helpful category, but he does not really explore this in the book. The claim that "in opposition, the party has focused more on ideological battles" would imply that the 1976 International Monetary Fund Cabinet debates, for example, were not shaped significantly by ideology. Kirkland does successfully show that "crises have shaped Labour's economic ideology". Yet, given his overall helpfully broad definition of *crisis*, his related claim that crises in opposition forced Labour to "shift towards the right" is less clear, given (for example) the trajectory of Corbyn's leadership after the 2015 defeat and 2016 referendum (161).

There is significant potential insight from exploring the relationship between Labour's economic ideology and economic, political, and electoral crises. There is also a pedagogical role for a rigorous but accessible history of Labour's economic ideology. However, despite the strengths in his analysis, Kirkland does not consistently provide that insight in *Labour's Economic Ideology*, and so the book cannot yet perform that role. For it to do so, revisions would be necessary.

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