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RECASTING BOURGEOIS BRITAIN?

THE BRITISH STATE IN THE YEARS WHICH
FOLLOWED THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, his study of the responses of the major States of Western Europe to the conditions created by the First World War, Charles Maier makes only, according to his standards, passing reference to Great Britain.¹ Initially this must appear quite reasonable, for if one compares the post-war situation of Britain with that of most of Continental Europe it must seem that Britain escaped, or at least experienced with a greatly reduced intensity, the disorder which beset other nations. It might therefore be assumed that the efforts of the British political elite to adjust to the post-war world are less worthy of attention than those of their Continental counterparts. Yet, while this may be the case, many domestic studies continue to identify 1919 as a moment of deep insecurity for the British State: the “Post-War Crisis” is becoming institutionalised as an obligatory lecture or chapter. The purpose of this essay is to re-examine major events of the post-war months to see whether they merit the title of “crisis”, and to evaluate developments in the machinery and conventions of government, in the few years following, to assess whether they constitute a “recasting” of the political system.

All studies of Britain in the post-war world must take some account of the victory itself. Hannah Arendt wrote: “since the end of the First World War we almost automatically expect that no government, and no state or form of government, will be strong enough to survive defeat in war.”² On the same principle, a State such as Britain, which proves equal to the considerable requirements of modern warfare, must emerge with its strength enhanced. In addition it must also be remembered that British society was far less disturbed by war than that of the other major European victor State, France. While Britain’s human losses were great, in terms of their general

¹ Ch. S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton, 1975).

² H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1963), p. 5.

effect perhaps incalculable, they don't match the demographic desolation that was visited upon France. Britain had also remained geographically isolated from the hostilities, and thus escaped both the material destruction and loss and the political upheavals and insecurities which foreign invasions bring.

Yet while it can be argued that the State and social order escaped relatively unscathed from the war and its attendant disorders, it might still be useful to look at Britain in terms of "bourgeois recasting". Victory did not exempt the country from all the changes set in motion by the war, and sooner or later some accommodation would have to be made. It is also important to bear in mind that while later historians might argue that Britain had avoided the more acute consequences of the war, the British political elite of the time did not feel that this was the case. While one might assume some mood of self-congratulation, even complacency, the record reveals deep uncertainty and pessimism. Ministers who had secured phenomenal levels of mobilisation with so few concessions now began to believe that the British people would fall victim to the first demagogue to address them. Those same trade unionists who had stuck to often uncongenial work in the poorest of conditions for the duration of the war were now assumed to be on the point of transferring their loyalties to Moscow. The Cabinet were happy to accept that post-war unrest in the engineering trades was the work of Russian agents and the assertion of the Scottish Secretary that the Forty Hours Strike in Glasgow was a "Bolshevist uprising". The *Times* supported this sort of analysis, arguing that the engineers were "the unconscious instruments of a planned campaign drawn up by 'intellectuals' in the background who desire to emulate Lenin and Trotsky".³ Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Carson were convinced that military measures were necessary, while Bonar Law argued that the moment had come to create a white guard: "All weapons ought to be available for distribution to the friends of the Government."⁴ While the Duke of Northumberland might ordinarily be dismissed as an anti-Labour paranoiac, he was at this time stating no more than the conventional wisdom of the establishment in arguing: "We are now faced with precisely the same position in regard to Labour as that with which we were faced before this war in regard to Germany."⁵

³ The *Times*, 1 February 1919.

⁴ Th. Jones, *Whitehall Diaries*, ed. by K. Middlemas (3 vols; London, 1969-71), I, p. 100.

⁵ Duke of Northumberland, "The Real Meaning of Nationalisation", in: *National Review*, No 74 (1919), p. 69. For a full discussion of this debate, M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour* (London, 1969).

At the root of the panic was some supposed connection between the militancy of sections of British labour and Bolshevism in Russia. Another *Times* correspondent, for example, saw behind domestic unrest the manipulative arm of the Russian leaders using their “clear logical Jewish brains to undermine Christianity”.⁶ Official reports from Russia intensified bourgeois anxieties without clarifying the issues. One British agent quoted from the *Krasnaya Gazeta*: “Without mercy, without sparing we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands; let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritski, Zinovief and Volodarski, let there be floods of the blood of the *bourgeois* – more blood, as much as possible.” No reassurance could be found in General Poole’s reports from the Caucasus, widely reported in British newspapers, that “commissariats of free love have been established in several towns, and respectable women flogged for refusing to yield.”⁷

Bolshevism became firmly linked in middle-class consciousness with starvation, typhus, influenza, syphilis, the nationalisation of women and the eating of horseflesh. Significantly, nobody attempted to relate the chaos in Russia to social and economic circumstances or the country’s previous history. Bolshevism apparently moved quite independently of other factors. It was seen as a phenomenon which could overcome a whole population quite against their will. One expert described its progress in Britain by means of a “temperature chart”.⁸ The Head of the Special Branch, Sir Basil Thomson, also relied heavily on medical images. Bolshevism was “a sort of infectious disease, spreading rapidly but insidiously, until like a cancer it eats away the fabric of society, and the patient ceases to even wish for his own recovery”. In the terminal stage, “civilisation crumbles away and the country returns to its original barbarism.”⁹

Bolshevism was widely seen as nihilistic and as such it could be afforded no rational credibility as an alternative social philosophy. Its containment was not seen as a political matter; as a stimulus to re-examining or reforming the existing society. Instead a *cordon sanitaire* was put around Russia, and those British subjects who fell victim to the insanity were identified, closely watched and, where it was thought necessary, put away. This fear of Bolshevism and the failure to analyse it in terms of economic and social

⁶ The *Times*, 2 April 1919.

⁷ A Collection of Reports on Bolshevism in Russia [Cmd 8] (1919). Lord Curzon was an inveterate collector of the more dubious stories. One agency in Berlin concocted and sold many of them. See F. S. Northedge and Audrey Wells, *Britain and Soviet Communism* (London, 1982), p. 34.

⁸ The *Times*, 8 November 1919.

⁹ Cabinet Papers 24/90, Public Record Office, London.

conditions was an important factor in distracting Ministers from the tasks of reconstruction. It left them heavily disposed to see new ideas as the thin ends of revolutionary wedges.

It is, however, important to recognise that suspicions of instability were not confined to the Right of politics. The sober, centrist *Contemporary Review* contained many articles which assumed that Britain stood close to some breakdown of order. William Brace warned: "A wrong turn or act of folly by people in authority could easily send this country in a direction which for a time would make ordered constitutional government impossible."¹⁰ Arthur Henderson argued that the war had represented "the final stage in the disintegration and collapse of the civilisation which was founded upon the individualist system of capitalist production",¹¹ and that its conclusion left Britain "on the verge of industrial revolt".¹² Henderson's remarks must be set in the context of a developing style of Labour Party rhetoric which used the threat of anarchic revolt to emphasise the importance of official Labour leaders in the scheme of things, yet there is no doubt that on this occasion the fears were genuine. Thus even an advanced socialist such as Gerald Gould argued that in the Railway Strike of 1919 the country came close to a revolution of a violent and undesirable type.¹³ The Webbs also argued that the situation was dangerous. They felt that the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, to them the core of the social machinery of capitalism, forcing people to work for whatever wage was offered, could not survive the introduction of the universal franchise. Capitalism could not survive without "the whip of starvation", and hence the choice facing Britain was between an orderly transition to socialism and a descent into chaos.¹⁴

While the prosaic outcome must, in itself, cast some doubt upon the validity of such views, it must be acknowledged that historians of the period have also had their difficulties and differences. Halévy wrote: "In the spring of 1919 it was difficult to resist the impression that England was on the edge of a social revolution",¹⁵ whereas Taylor and Mowat present the incidents of unrest as essentially ephemeral and subject to removal by minor adjustments of policy.¹⁶ Even the very significance of the war itself has been

¹⁰ W. Brace, "Industrial Unrest", in: *Contemporary Review*, CXVI (1919), p. 257.

¹¹ A. Henderson, "The Outlook for Labour", *ibid.*, CXIII (1918), p. 121.

¹² *Id.*, "The Industrial Unrest: A New Policy Required", *ibid.*, CXV (1919), pp. 364.

¹³ G. Gould, *The Coming Revolution* (London, 1920), p. 19.

¹⁴ S. and B. Webb, *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation* (London, 1923), p. 164.

¹⁵ E. Halévy, *L'Ère des Tyrannies* (Paris, 1938), p. 151; *The Era of Tyrannies* (London, 1960), p. 180.

¹⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (London, 1970), pp. 186-88; C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London, 1968), p. 43.

subjected to question. While Marwick and Gilbert reflect the view held, almost as an article of faith, by contemporary observers, that during the war “A world died and a new one was born in slightly more than four years”,¹⁷ others have argued that “the *general course* of British history was little affected by the war, which was a manifestation rather than a cause.”¹⁸ Most historians of Labour have followed the former view and presented the war as a critical stimulant to the aspirations and imaginations of both leaders and led. Many have seen the war as the major cause of the reorganisation of the Labour Party and the modernisation of the TUC, and a number favour Kendall’s view of 1919 as “the greatest revolutionary opportunity in generations”.¹⁹ Yet McKibbin has presented a view that stresses continuity and stability: the post-war Labour Party was not very different from its pre-war predecessor, and even the doubling of trade-union membership was of far less significance that has been widely assumed.²⁰ “Everything points to Labour’s enduring *ante-bellum* character: continuity of leadership and personnel at all levels, effective continuity of policy and, above all, continuity of organization.”²¹

Both views miss the target, for, while Kendall’s and similar accounts greatly underestimate the resources of a modern State, McKibbin’s ignores the new difficulties of the post-war world. 1919 did, after all, see a massive rise in industrial unrest: thirty-five million days were lost in strikes as compared to six million in 1918, and eleven and a half million in 1913. The unofficial shop-stewards’ movement was still an active force, and a new generation of official leaders were taking up more militant positions than their predecessors. Many were favourable to the idea of “direct action” and few were willing to confine their industrial power to questions of wages, hours and conditions of service. While McKibbin is correct in pointing out that the rate of trade-union growth was rather less during the war than it had been between 1910 and 1913, such a comparison obscures the significance of the latter period of growth, for at this point it was sheer members rather than rates of increase which were important. The doubling of trade-union members between 1914 and 1919 took them past ten million members to a point where they dominated the manual workforce. The unions had achieved a central, permanent position in domestic politics from which they

¹⁷ B. B. Gilbert, *British Social Policy 1914-1939* (London, 1970), p. 1, and, for example, A. Marwick, “The Impact of the First World War on British Society”, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, III (1968), No 1, pp. 51-63.

¹⁸ H. Havinghurst, *Britain in Transition* (Chicago, 1979), p. 136.

¹⁹ W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921* (London, 1969), p. 195.

²⁰ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (London, 1974), p. 239.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

might pursue their “new unionist” aims of requiring the State to provide those benefits and securities which the market-place could not.

Moreover, a strike by any of the larger unions would have consequences that would require government action. Some additional justification for the unease in government circles was provided by the police strikes and the numerous recorded incidents of unrest in the armed forces. Some troops discovered that their protests could create additional discomfort in their superiors if they displayed red flags. While such incidents were actually directed to limited objectives and red flags were no more than convenient symbols, it would have been a bold government which remained entirely calm.²² There was no need, however, to have recourse to the “winds of revolution” to explain the situation. As one contemporary observer pointed out, “the dismantling of the machine of war and the restoration of industry to a peace footing was bound to be accompanied by enormous unrest, dislocation, dissatisfaction, and hardship.”²³ Trade unions had the task of the practical restoration of rights and practices suspended for the duration of the war. Moreover, the boom of the immediate post-war months afforded workers an ideal opportunity for expressing accumulated grievances and stimulated expectations. If the need of the new trade-union leaders to assert themselves, the pressure of the unofficial movement and, indeed, the greater size of the unions themselves are also taken into account, it is clearly not essential to view the higher levels of visible unrest in terms of a qualitative shift in working-class consciousness.

The apparent evidence for underlying stability in election results seems to have provided little comfort to contemporary defenders of order, and no deterrent at all to later historians of the “revolutionary opportunity” school. Yet the result of the 1918 general election, even with a generous allowance for manipulation and distraction, must represent a formidable vote of confidence in conventional politics. Labour’s 22% of the popular vote in 1918 and some exciting by-election victories in 1919 are not evidence of instability. The Labour Party was all about gradual constitutional change. This was its emphatically declared purpose and those few who misunderstood this had only themselves to blame. Those on the Right who wanted to get themselves into a panic could only do so on the basis of “revolution by constitutional means”²⁴ or similar concoctions. While the party’s gradual progress to the position of second party and the growth of

²² D. Englander and J. Osborne, “Jack, Tommy, and Henry Dubb: The Armed Forces and the Working Class”, in: *Historical Journal*, XXI (1978), pp. 593-621.

²³ A. G. Gardiner, “The Present Discontents”, in: *Contemporary Review*, CXVI, p. 494.

²⁴ Cabinet Papers 24/96.

the trade unions might in the future complicate the processes of accumulating and defending wealth and privilege, it offered no immediate challenge to their existence. It is perhaps here that some of the period's paradoxes can be understood, for it seems that the Cabinet adopted a fatalistic attitude towards what now must seem no more than manageable crises. Ignoring that capacity of the modern State to contain, deflect, politically defeat, or simply live with a degree of dissent, they began to act like some *ancien régime*, fearful that their next concession might be their last. However, in all fairness it should be recorded that the apocalyptic mood of the immediate post-war months led others to underestimate the flexibility of the political and social system. Thus, while the Webbs were correct in pointing out that the old "whip of starvation" could no longer be applied, they were failing to see how much a modern capitalist State could achieve with a system of relative destitution.

It is quite reasonable that so many studies of the post-war period should have concentrated on the absence of significant reform, for the contrast between wartime promises and expectations and the post-war reality is remarkable. In practice the government was far more concerned to contain than to acknowledge the much-discussed "new rights of the working classes". While it would be wrong to ignore the Representation of the People Act (1918), for recent research has identified this rather than earlier contenders as "the decisive act", the moment at which the working class became an effective majority of the electorate, its significance as a concession should not be overrated, for in the circumstances it was the minimum that had to be done. Lloyd George, who might have been expected to try to make something of promises of reconstruction, seemed to forget his earlier enthusiasm for social reform as a cheap defence against revolution and opted for "the world stage", and ineffectuality at Versailles. The National Industrial Conference died almost on inception, largely because Ministers could not allow employers and workers to settle their own differences.²⁵ Such marginal benefits as did float downwards, most notably the Unemployment Insurance Act, bore all the marks of expediency, if not downright desperation.²⁶ The only extensions of State power viewed with

²⁵ J. E. Cronin, "Coping with Labour, 1918-1926", in: *Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain*, ed. by id. and J. Schneer (London, 1982), pp. 134-35; B.-J. Wendt, "Vom Interventionsstaat zum Industrieparlament: Ordnungspolitische Vorstellungen in England nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg", in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, XII (1986), pp. 5-33.

²⁶ Gilbert, *British Social Policy*, op. cit. See also on this Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, op. cit., pp. 41-43. He argues: "Total war meant social transformation, the

any favour were those designed to bolster its coercive abilities and thus strengthen the capacity of the government to resist the pressure of organised labour. What could have been a point of departure was turned into the defence of a last ditch.

One side of State activity which was taken very seriously was the political surveillance carried out by the police forces. The work of the regional special branches was co-ordinated and supplemented by an organisation at Scotland House, initially under the leadership of Sir Basil Thomson. By a range of methods which at one end included mail intercepts, the secret infiltration of private meetings and organisations and the corruption of individuals to, at the other, the careful regular reading of the socialist press, a whole mass of information on radical politics was gathered. Thomson had begun this work during the war, but in 1919 the Cabinet decided that the organisation should be extended and that they should be given a weekly account of the activities of "subversives". The analysis contained in Thomson's reports was initially as wild and alarmist as that of his political superiors, yet he recovered more quickly. Once he had abandoned his more eccentric notions of revolutionary possibilities, he came to feel that the most potent threat to the established order lay in the use of the new mass organisations of labour to undermine or thwart the will of government.

This led Thomson to set great importance on another State organisation, which was already engaging the attention of a number of Ministers. This body, later to be known as the Supply and Transport Organisation, based on a Cabinet committee, was an attempt to co-ordinate and mobilise such services, materials and personnel – national, local and private – as a government might need to defeat a major strike. No attempt was ever made to distinguish between strikes called for industrial and political purposes. It was tacitly assumed that all strikes above a certain, undefined, size were political and should be treated as such. In the months of panic which followed the war State activity in these areas was massively and visibly coercive. When labour troubles arose, Ministers were inclined simply to throw in everything they had. They tried to institute emergency food schemes by the use of war surplus supplies and army lorries; they called up battleships and tanks and large numbers of armed troops. Previous conventions about limitations on the use of force were ignored, and the strict

centralization of power, the equalization of income, the concession of new rights to the working classes." While this accurately reflects how many people felt at the time, the reality was more complex. There was actually, between 1913-14 and 1922-24 a move in wage levels in favour of non-manual over manual workers. G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain 1906-1960* (London, 1965), p. 107. See also A. L. Bowley and M. Hogg, *Has Poverty Diminished?* (London, 1922).

division between the use of the police and the military began to break down. Government attempts at propaganda were, and were seen to be, unco-ordinated, opportunistic and ineffective.²⁷ The Railway Strike of 1919 found the union side better co-ordinated and their case better publicised than that of the government.

That same year brought complaints from the Admiralty that the use of navy stokers to man the pumps in the Yorkshire mines was not only illegal, but had threatened to put the Home Fleet out of action. Haig pointed out that existing strike plans called for an army even greater than that at present in existence, and the Army Council warned that even of existing troops many were civilian soldiers and could not be relied upon if used in industrial disputes. Yet it was also becoming clear that the existing plans were not only unworkable, but that they were politically counter-productive. The government's frequent and visible overreaction left it vulnerable to the charge that it was using the "war machine" to crush the legitimate aspirations of labour.²⁸ Its actions seemed destined not only to further the cause of labour, but actually to strengthen the extraparliamentary, militant wing of the movement. The government which had already ruled out the possibility of material concessions was clearly in need of new tactics if not a new strategy.

A number of interesting suggestions have been made as to what this strategy turned out to be. John Foster, in a version of events which possesses the considerable virtue of making explicit what other similar accounts only imply, suggests that the mature response of the State to the development of Labour was "a set of bribes that by-passed the market and went direct from the state or employers to (or through) trade union leaders and politicians".²⁹ Foster claims that the establishment's solution seems to have been worked out in three stages. Before 1922 they attempted to prevent the rise of Labour as a political identity, but after the Labour Party's success in the general election of that year their attention became "focused on 'educating' labour, using various forms of ideological persuasion to turn the new political identity into constitutional, reformist channels."³⁰ "A 'climate of opinion' would be created by a growing battery of mass influence – newspapers, radio, the church, education and the govern-

²⁷ For the Industrial Unrest and Strike Committees see Cabinet Papers 27/59, 77, 83 and 84.

²⁸ Arthur Henderson's accusation that the "War Machine" was being used to thwart the legitimate demands of labour was discussed in Cabinet on 3 October 1919. Cabinet Papers 23/12.

²⁹ J. Foster, "British Imperialism and the Labour Aristocracy", in: *The General Strike 1926*, ed. by J. Skelley (London, 1975), p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

ment itself. The labour leadership would be persuaded to adopt a course of action that would enable it to 'win' this public opinion".³¹ Only after the shock of Red Friday did the establishment turn to more drastically coercive methods.

The most obvious difficulty with this analysis lies in its considerable overestimation of the cohesiveness and competence of this "establishment". Its members are credited with an ability to manipulate events and foresee consequences that available records cannot support. In the discussions of Conservative politicians, presumably the political arm of the establishment, it is difficult to detect any such clear changes. Once the immediate post-war panic was over, there emerged at the centre clear divisions on the issue of how Labour might best be dealt with. There was a right wing, which always felt there was some association between the Labour Party and Russian Bolshevism. If they did not believe that all Labour activity was inherently subversive, they were usually on hand to point out that any particular incidence involved vital points of principle, which ruled out any possibility of compromise. There were others, Lord Salisbury for one, who, while they did not regard Labour as a revolutionary threat in the comic-opera sense of Robert Munro or the Duke of Northumberland, did believe that the measures of nationalisation, which a successful Labour Party might introduce, would inflict permanent damage on all that they were in politics to defend. At the other wing there were those, such as Steel Maitland and Baldwin himself, who always appreciated the constitutional intentions of Labour leaders and understood the essential fragility of the trade-union alliances that so worried some of their colleagues.

There is no evidence of any authoritative synthesis of such views. The different positions attracted additional support and exercised greater influence where they appeared to provide the most appropriate reaction to the circumstances of the time. Changes in personnel and patterns of conflict and alliance, even the changing propensity of other issues to distract attention, had their influence on the persistence and vigour with which a point of view was expressed, even whether its supporters thought it worth advancing at all, for while such disagreement could become latent it never ceased to exist. For example, the hard-liners were defeated on the political-levy question in 1925, but in 1927 managed to gain that and a good deal more. None of the main protagonists had changed their minds. Both Steel Maitland and the Prime Minister found much of the Trade Disputes Act unnecessary and counter-productive, yet the changed circumstances made it difficult for them to resist.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Foster is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that most leading Conservative politicians were not thrown into a panic by the electoral advance of the Labour Party. Yet the idea that it was the Conservative Party or any other establishment body which was instrumental in “educating” their opponents in constitutional politics is quite misleading, for this was an unnecessary task. The Labour Party had always been firmly and publicly committed to constitutional principle. Within the party this was widely assumed to be the only practical basis on which to compete for electoral support. Even those at odds with the party leaders accepted this principle. Most advocates of direct action saw it as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, the process of persuasion, election and reform by legislative action. If the Labour Party rather than other available parties managed to attract the support of substantial numbers of working-class voters, the fact must be primarily attributed to the ability of the party and its leaders to present themselves as an attractive and realistic focal point for the aspirations and beliefs of these voters. It was not, and could not have been, something that the Conservative Party or the establishment could have created. If it is argued that because of this some advantage accrued to the defenders of the existing social order, it must be recognised that the advantage was gratuitously acquired.

There may well have been some common interest that Conservative politicians were trying to defend, but in practice they were hard put to define it. Behind the actions there were some basic agreements, frequently unspoken and rarely developed: that their purpose in politics was to defend constitutional government and private ownership, and to protect land-owners and employees against the encroachments of trade unions or “the State”. Yet there was much disagreement about how the defence should be conducted and how such concerns could be related to actual political choices. There was certainly no attempt to divide and rule, no concerted effort to detach moderate labour from the Left in order to secure gains in the long term. Instead, either because they believed it or out of electoral expediency, Conservative propagandists militantly ignored divisions in the labour movement and sought to colour the whole with the material provided by the unpopular few.³² The conduct of the government’s case during the General Strike is often held up as an example of the effective execution of a well-worked-out plan, yet this view cannot survive a close examination.

³² See for example a private letter from John Gretton MP to Baldwin, 12 February 1925, Baldwin Papers, Vol. 11, Cambridge University Library. He did not regard the moderation of the Labour Party as being significant: “The most dangerous position is where a ‘moderate’ party by so called constitutional means soothes public opinion while stealthily and with smooth words it proceeds step by step to revolution.”

In reality such consistency as Baldwin was able to maintain during this short period was achieved in the teeth of internal opposition.

Even that central element in the strategy, the award of the nine-month subsidy and a Royal Commission to the mining industry, so that the conflict might be postponed until the government had had time to work on public opinion, was bitterly contested by the hard-liners. There was so much opposition at the final Cabinet meeting on the issue that it would be quite wrong to present the outcome as a foregone conclusion.³³ Baldwin's greatest achievement was to prevent his colleagues dissipating the opportunity which a divided labour movement had presented them with. The absence of any long-term strategy is only emphasised by the fact that afterwards Baldwin was unable to restrain these opponents from overthrowing that very policy which had brought them such a comprehensive political victory. All models involving well-laid plots and smooth manipulations break down on the muddles and inconsistencies of actual decision taking.

A contrasting theory of the changing relationship between the State and labour is suggested by Keith Middlemas.³⁴ He argues that during 1917 a number of influential politicians came to believe that conventional State institutions were no longer capable of dealing with industrial conflicts. In order to stem this source of social disruption these politicians began to develop lines of communication between the State and organized labour and employers, particularly as represented by the Trades Union Congress and the National Conference of Employers' Organisations. The State came to use these organisations to exert influence at all levels of industry: "To put it simply, what had been merely interest groups crossed the political threshold and became part of the extended state".³⁵ It was, however, a system with a "corporate bias" rather than a corporate State: "Progress towards institutional collaboration, and the avoidance of economic competition and class conflict is a tendency, not an irreversible trend." Moreover, there was no formal basis: "what was created was never precise, nor contractual in the sense ascribed by Maine or Dicey to the law of the constitution, but existed as a code among those groups admitted to the process of government – a sort of *outillage mental* acquired by the leaders of institutions as part of their political apprenticeship, or a passport into the

³³ Cabinet Papers 23/50. That the argument was very bitter is reflected in the fact that on 30 July 1925 it was recorded in the minutes that the decision was not unanimous. This was most unusual.

³⁴ K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society* (London, 1979), p. 372.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

state domain.”³⁶ This triangular relationship was thus the new “efficient secret” and, like Bagehot’s earlier one, legitimated its decisions by reference to dignified but obsolete institutions:

governing institutions and parties combined to take issue with the excluded, not on the question of the threat to their own role in the composition of the state, but of the threat to the already obsolescent parliamentary system – forcing them, almost by definition, to attack from outside the confines of what the great mass of the electorate still accepted as the legitimate centre of political activity.³⁷

Middlemas’s analysis has a number of merits, not the least of which is to deal in terms of options which were actually understood and discussed by those who took part in these events, but it does avoid some important questions. In common with other corporatist analyses of political power it tends to fix on the processes of bargaining rather than questions of how the participants were selected, what was the real status of the participants, both within the group and outside it, and who determined what could or could not be discussed. One of Middlemas’s critics has conceded that such discussions did take place, but claims that industrialists and trade unionists had to confine their suggestions within a predetermined general economic policy.³⁸ Rodney Lowe has made a similar point in his study of the Ministry of Labour: there were agents and apostles of the corporatist tendency within the Ministry, but they were always subject to the constraints imposed by the Treasury.³⁹ For example, the decision to return to the gold standard in 1925, while it had a major detrimental effect on most sectors of British industry, was taken in response to an orthodoxy derived from the instincts and interests of financial groups. That many industrialists were prepared to go along with the decision must be related to the fact that they knew their place in the order of things and were conditioned to acquiesce in such matters, rather than to any calculation of their own interest.

There must also be some doubt as to whether the contacts between groups went beyond normal consultations. The NCEO was certainly in frequent contact with the government, but its main concern often appeared to be the defence of its members’ immediate interests. It devoted, for example, a great deal of energy to resisting the forty-eight-hour week which had been agreed under the Washington Convention. When its private

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 371-72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

³⁸ M. Dintenfuss in *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No 41 (1980), p. 64.

³⁹ R. Lowe, “The Ministry of Labour 1916-1924. A Graveyard of Social Reform?”, in: *Public Administration*, LII (1974), pp. 415-38.

representations appeared to have failed and the government seemed on the point of ratifying the treaty, the NCEO went public, instituted a campaign of press advertising and attempted to mobilise sympathetic backbenchers. Such evidence is not conclusive, for a certain amount of public disagreement is not incompatible with corporate bargaining, but it does indicate a reluctance on the part of employers to compromise on matters of direct interest or to confine their opposition to the inner councils, and might suggest that they regarded negotiations with government as an opportunity to pursue an interest rather than a forum in which interests could be re-adjusted and re-defined.

In respect of trade unions there are more serious problems. To sustain the corporatist-tendency thesis it is not necessary to demonstrate that the government afforded the trade unions an equal share with employers in the bargaining process, but it is essential to show that they were allowed a role which was permanent and relatively constant. It is necessary to identify political figures who not only regarded a corporate system as desirable, but were prepared to devote significant resources to the maintenance of labour leaders at the centre of the system. Yet the history of the post-war period, even after the immediate post-war crisis, is one of almost permanent Conservative hostility to trade unions. Moreover, it was not only the activities of unions which came under attack, but their whole legal and political identity. A central feature of corporatist system must be an acceptance by the State of the right of group leaders to speak on behalf of their members and to regulate the internal affairs of their own organisations. Conservatives, though, were perpetually questioning the representative status of union leaders and appealing directly to their members. It could be claimed that these were the “dinosaurs” of Conservative politics, too stupid or “out of touch” to appreciate the “efficient secret”. Baldwin’s resistance on the political levy in 1925 could be characterised as the action of an insider, a participant in the corporate process, holding the ring against ignorant outsiders. However, this line of reasoning breaks down at the 1927 Trade Disputes Act, for this was dinosaur power in full flood. Not only did the act seek to undermine the legal rights of trade unions and attack what were basic interests, it also sought, as Alan Anderson has convincingly argued,⁴⁰ a symbolic humiliation of labour. It is this indulgence in the politics of symbolism which falls most obviously outside a corporatist frame of reference. So while there were those in government who were deeply committed to a corporatist strategy and though their activities continued

⁴⁰ A. Anderson, “The Political Symbolism of the Labour Laws”, in: *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No 23 (1971), pp. 13-15.

unimpeded for long periods of time, the process did not enjoy that importance which Middlemas suggests, for in reality the agenda was restricted by other, non-participating, interests, and the process and its results were subject to revision or reversal by a rougher, more fundamental political process.

While it may be difficult to detect any predominant influence or plan, it is still undeniably the case that changes did take place in the relationship between State and society in these years. In the midst of the *ad hoc* responses, the arguments and reverses it is possible to detect a gradual shift towards modernisation. Gianfranco Poggi has suggested that modern States exhibit three characteristic tendencies in respect of the maintenance of civil order.⁴¹ There is, firstly, a development towards a more rational and specialised use of coercive power. Secondly, the organisational complexity of the modern State provides an opportunity for a continuous re-distribution of functions between different State agencies in order to secure the best balance at any given time. Thirdly, in modern industrial societies there is a blurring of the distinction between State and society, and thus States can involve non-governmental bodies in their work.

It is not claimed that these years represent the break between ancient and modern in the history of the British State. In some ways what was happening was no more than a process of re-discovery, politicians finding out that the old mystifications still exercised as much influence over the population at large as they did over their own thinking. Yet it still makes sense to fit the developments into a pattern of continuing modernisation. The concern over the conspicuous use of military power against strikes provides a useful example, for in their own ways the critics were arguing that coercion should be seen as “a more controlled and specialised aspect of rule”. They argued here for a return to, and an extension of, the principle that the army should only be deployed in civil policing duties in the direct emergency. This idea became so deeply embedded in State convention that, when it was later decided that it was necessary to use units of the territorial army for police duties during the General Strike, they were made to enlist, in civilian clothes, as special constables.⁴²

Much care was also taken over the dispersal of State functions. A great deal was made of the independence of the local police forces. The appearance of independence was always, however, greater than the reality, for while Chief Constables were nominally free to decide how to apply the law

⁴¹ G. Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State* (London, 1978), pp. 117-49.

⁴² Cabinet Papers 23/52.

they were in practice, in politically sensitive matters, such as the interpretation of the law on picketing and prosecutions for sedition, kept on a tight rein by the Home Office.⁴³ Yet when things went wrong, the impression of independence could be very useful. When, for example, the Recorder of Liverpool refused to try a group of unemployed men because of the brutal manner in which the police had handled their demonstration, the Home Secretary could evade some of the responsibility by emphasising the independence of local agents.⁴⁴ If one compares the emergency organisation of 1919 with that of 1926, it is this distribution of functions which is the most striking feature. There was initially much discussion of what might safely be entrusted to local authorities, as some were felt to be politically unreliable. Yet by 1925 the government could confidently assume that the advantages of such a policy were so great, in terms of cost and efficiency as well as in the spreading of political responsibility, as to outweigh the anticipated difficulties.

The most interesting aspect of State development, however, concerned the blurring of public and private organisations, the line between State and society, for it was here that the political changes were most clearly visible. The first politician consistently to challenge the axiom that large strikes must be met with the full force of State power was Eric Geddes. One historian has described Geddes as one of a generation of businessmen turned politician who “lacked even the feeling for public opinion that the politician needs for survival”.⁴⁵ Yet this is a considerable underestimation of Geddes, who in truth considerably influenced Stanley Baldwin and Sir John Anderson, then Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, and with them produced the plans which became the basis of all future operations. He was concerned with reducing expenditure and with challenging existing assumptions, yet he was certainly not a-political. Geddes, it might indeed be argued, was the first politician in the post-war years to base his ideas on a proper recognition of the political strengths of the modern State. What Geddes saw was that the power of this State was not in the forces at its direct disposal, not in its physical capacity to issue propaganda nor in yards filled with rusting war surplus lorries and stores of deteriorating foodstuff. The mobilisation of half-competent and unwilling soldiers and sailors held no promise of present security or future social peace. The key to Geddes’s plan was his recognition that these measures were not only costly, inefficient and

⁴³ For the Home Office role in the 1918 railway strike see Home Office Papers 45/346578, Public Record Office.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 11032.

⁴⁵ R. Desmarais, “The Supply and Transport Committee of the British Government” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1972), p. 83.

politically counter-productive, but they were also unnecessary. There were a multitude of firms and private organisations and large numbers of individual citizens who, out of support for some aspect of the *status quo* or antagonism to organised labour, could be mobilised in the defence of the realm. Rather than becoming involved in costly and complicated substitutes, the government should create the conditions in which the normal operators, with appropriate volunteers and protection, could continue transport services and maintain essential supplies. To Geddes, the main task was mobilisation: "The war had created in the people a habit of looking to the Government for direction and initiative in every department of life."⁴⁶ When Geddes was sent to Yorkshire as government representative during the coal strike of 1919, he was horrified by the apathy of the local industrialists. The first priority, he argued, was to "get public opinion in this area properly worked up to the gravity of the situation".⁴⁷

This became the main task of central government in plans for future emergencies. The business of government was not so much to order people to act, but rather to create the conditions under which they would want to. Yet of course the effectiveness of such action would depend upon pre-planning and organisation, which would need to be undertaken with some discretion. This, however, proved a good deal easier in Britain than it might have done elsewhere, for in addition to the native tradition of governmental secrecy and a press with little taste for investigation, the State also had the advantage of the socio-cultural homogeneity of the upper and middle classes. It was relatively easy to find responsible and discreet volunteers to organise the emergency structures who could, in effect, be treated as if they were part of the formal structure of government. A network of around ninety Volunteer Service Committees was set up under locally based chairmen, "a useful body of trustworthy personnel",⁴⁸ who made contacts with appropriate local businessmen, road-haulage operators and others whose services might be of use in blunting the effects of a strike.

This scheme was cheap and manageable, and promised to be relatively efficient, yet its overwhelming advantage was political. While it would be impossible to read the records of the Supply and Transport Organisation

⁴⁶ Cabinet Papers 24/128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 23/11 and 27/59.

⁴⁸ While middle- and upper-class representatives of the State could normally be trusted, central government was quite capable of punishing and rebuking those who failed to come up to the mark. Some magistrates were criticised and others removed from the bench because they were insufficiently enthusiastic for the government case in the General Strike. Some were "reported" to the Lord Chancellor by Lords Lieutenant. The Bishop of Exeter was "reported" to the Prime Minister for allowing Margaret Bondfield to speak on church property. Baldwin Papers, Vol. 22.

without recognising that its driving force, from Ministers at the top to volunteers at the bottom, was a desire to put labour back in its place, and while in reality the guiding hand of the State was in every action, its operations at the time were, with some degree of plausibility, presented as those of a community engaged in a collective act of self-defence. As a strike began, the government would attempt to draw public attention away from the issues involved to the dislocations and discomforts, real and imagined, for which the strikers were responsible. Where possible an atmosphere of crisis should be created so as to suggest that the unions were about to undermine all civilised life. Then volunteers, motivated only by a simple patriotism, would come forward to protect the essential services of the community.

In practice matters were somewhat different, for the government always reserved to itself the right to decide who was part of this “community” and which services were “essential”. For example, all offers by trade unionists to mitigate the unintended effects of their actions were robustly rejected. There were several occasions where the government allowed essential services to be cut off rather than contemplate such co-operation.⁴⁹ Even the voluntary aspect of the arrangements cannot pass unquestioned, for while, when prompted, most of those required willingly gave of their services, the government was quite prepared to coerce those who did not. Thus, during the General Strike, the manager of the Manchester Ship Canal was bullied into accepting blackleg labour and attempting to carry on his business,⁵⁰ and in the 1921 coal dispute the government encouraged passively inclined industrialists to import foreign coal and actually underwrote the costs of the transactions.⁵¹ The State always sought to create an impression of neutrality on the issue in dispute, and to be concerned only with the abstractions of legality and the constitution, but in practice these objectives always involved the defeat of organised labour. The use of “volunteers”, who were in practice organised and amenable to central control, offered effective power without responsibility. The scheme was deeply appealing to politicians with essentially liberal instincts.

The post-war settlement in Britain cannot neatly be defined, for there was no underlying plan. What was not done was in a sense more important than what was. It is clear, though, that all discussions and decisions emerged from within the confines of liberal prejudices. There was no serious con-

⁴⁹ See Cabinet Papers 27/260 for how the government risked the whole supply in London rather than allow unions to supply hospitals and emergency services only.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 83.

sideration of broadening the legitimate base of government by taking on new functions, but rather an assumption that the authority of the State was already spread so thinly that as many functions as possible should be discarded. The debate was not always explicit and was never conducted in theoretical terms, but in those unextended appeals to necessity and common sense favoured by working politicians. The decision to shuffle off responsibility for the mines and the railways was a foregone conclusion in that it involved a coincidence of general prejudice and political instinct. It certainly made a good deal of immediate sense to get out of an area which promised nothing but trouble, and conserve energy and authority for difficulties which could not be avoided. Nobody seriously suggested that anything constructive could be drawn from the experiences of war politics. The advantages of a continuing intervention seemed confined to a distant future, while the difficulties were only too immediately apparent. The day-to-day work of discipline and motivation which the State had drifted into during the war should be restored to "the dull compulsion of economic relations", with State intervention at the margins. The new mass organisations of labour were only to be viewed in terms of their destructive capacities. In this sense any element of corporatism was to be rejected, because it would tend to legitimate group identities, and thus weaken the "isolation effect", that much valued capacity of the liberal State to deal with its subjects as individual citizens.⁵²

The politicians felt that, instead of pursuing novel and dangerous solutions, their energies would be better spent on expounding on the "naturalness" of the existing system and the inevitability of its more unfortunate consequence. Inevitably a clear separation of State and economy was no longer possible, but contacts should be kept to a minimum and, if they had to become public, presented as *ad hoc* and unusual occurrences. Interventions to ameliorate the grosser effects of market operations were also to be defended as exceptional. It was even decided that propaganda in favour of the *status quo* should be farmed out to the numerous private organisations already in the field.⁵³ The larger ones were run by "reliable" people, who were highly responsive to government suggestions. By this decision the

⁵² See N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London, 1973), p. 188. He described this phenomenon as the "isolation effect".

⁵³ The two largest and most respectable organisations were National Propaganda and Industrial Information. Both went to considerable lengths to keep their existence secret. Chairman of the former was Rear Admiral Sir Reginald Hall MP, a former head of Naval Intelligence. It sought to propagate "the necessity for increased production" and oppose "all acts against constitutional government" by pamphlets, speakers, meetings etc. Industrial Information had the same respectable connections and objectives, but worked through the existing newspapers. See Cabinet Papers 27/84.

State saved money and kept itself out of a deeply contentious area while effectively losing nothing. Moreover, this decision embodied a greater political wisdom, which politicians such as Baldwin instinctively understood. On the one hand the defence of “capitalism” in explicit terms could serve to encourage the notion that its retention involved some choice and the availability of some alternative. It was far better to insinuate the idea of a natural order of things with irresistible demands and an unbreakable logic. On the other hand a close association of the State and the capitalist economic system could only serve to make the State appear limited and instrumental rather than dignified and universal. When it became necessary to offer some general rallying cry, some indication of what it was all about, it was far safer to rely on order, tradition, social peace or, simply, “England”.

The post-war settlement then was not systematic in either conception or introduction. It emerged as politicians discovered that things had changed less than they feared; that the old ropes still had bells on them. Basil Thomson reported reassuringly that Royal visits were still popular with working people, that football and racing were rather more compelling than Bolshevik propaganda and that old allies were alive and still kicking. While it might be a cause for concern that some working men were reading the *Daily Herald*, most of them read the rest of the popular press which was full of anti labour abuse. Politicians slowly began to suspect that the demonstrators of 1919 had been no more than a noisy minority, to realise that they still enjoyed a measure of support and to understand that, in any case, they were not running some *ancien régime*, liable to tumble over at the onset of crisis. There had been changes, but the situation was by no means out of their grasp. To ensure a tolerable level of security required, in the end, very little in the way of contrivance, for the instincts and prejudices of establishment politicians found many echoes in society at large.

Even among trade unionists there were few who rejected all the beliefs propagated by Conservative politicians. It would be impossible to make any sense of later developments if this had not been the case. To those who would argue that “the political situation in the period from 1918 to 1924 was highly volatile and the subsequent ascendancy of Labourism over Communism was by no means guaranteed from the start”⁵⁴ it is perhaps enough to point out that if the contest was so close the result must be accounted a very remarkable one indeed. Yet it is also wrong to see this period as just further evidence of the docility and backwardness of the British working class, for

⁵⁴ B. Schwarz and M. Durham, “A Safe and Sane Labourism”, in: *Crises in the British State 1880-1930*, ed. by M. Langan and B. Schwarz (London, 1985), p. 141.

there are unmistakable signs of activity involving, at least, a sizeable minority. While the development of ideas and institutions was in conscious opposition to central features of the existing society, it was not revolutionary. It concerned the development of a culture within which complaints could be defined and articulated and, often by appropriating and re-directing symbols already understood in the broader society, it sought to register and develop a new social identity. The vast majority of labour activists were too much carried away with this new self confidence, too much taken up with these new opportunities for political action within existing society, to give any serious consideration to subversion.

Thus Britain's rulers had to make far fewer adjustments than most of their European counterparts to meet the post-war world. Their activities are better characterised as reassertion rather than recasting. While more radical solutions, authoritarian, paternalist and corporatist, had their advocates at the highest levels, they failed to have any broad appeal because they ran counter to the whole tradition of thinking about the State and society. While later observers, from almost any political perspective, may see in this a badly wasted opportunity, this minimal modernisation within the existing liberal framework was the almost inevitable outcome, if only because any other course of action would have required greater energy and consistency of purpose.

What emerged, then, was not a State seeking to dominate or lead opinion, but rather one which used its limited resources to select and reinforce those existing themes which could most readily be turned to advantage. Not a State which sought all power for itself, but one which recognised that the maintenance of order rested on the activities of numerous individuals and organisations outside the formal governmental framework. It was better to develop an effective alignment with such groups than attempt to supersede them. However, the State which emerged from this process was in no sense a weak one. In almost every sense its acceptance of a limited role meant that it was politically stronger than it could otherwise have been. Nor was its role negligible or marginal. While in reality there was no moment when the State was all that stood between established order and social collapse, and no single decision which, had it gone the wrong way, would have precipitated mass disorder; while the work was never as desperate or difficult as the more histrionic participants felt it to be, it was nonetheless essential. The work of government rarely demanded, or got, great imaginative skill and there was always a considerable margin for judgmental error, yet the survival of the social order still rested on the ability of this State continuously to reinforce and support its allies and to discomfort and undermine its opponents.