After the deluge
Politics and civil society in the wake of the New Right
Michael Kenny

Michael Kenny argues that the different parties in recent debates over community share the assumption that we are now witnessing the triumph of civil society over the state. Tracing the origins and evolution of these claims, he discusses the problems of looking at social change in this way and critically analyses some contemporary conceptions of civil society.

The rise of civil society?
One of the most important themes in contemporary politics concerns the apparent failure of the New Right to capture the hearts and minds of significant sections of the British population and to reshape society in its own image. Does this signify the residually left-wing commitments of the nation, manifested for instance in continuing support for the welfare state? Or might this suggest the emergence of a new era in British political history, characterised by the consolidation of a dense and vibrant civil society which is now so complex and autonomous that any state-led attempt to reshape the patterns and relations of life within this realm is now impossible? The latter argument carries great force in present circumstances. It connects with the prevailing mood of disillusion with the conventional political
Soundings

system and the declining faith in public institutions and representatives noted by commentators across the political spectrum. This type of argument appears to reinforce both the communitarianism advocated by New Labour and the libertarian anti-statism which radical intellectuals on the left have advocated since the 1960s.

If this does represent a plausible reading of recent political developments, some uncomfortable questions arise. If political life in the 1990s involves the triumph of civil society over the state, what implications does this have for conventional definitions of what both the left and right in British politics stand for? If it is accurate to argue that civil society is now the primary sphere within modern political life, what does this mean for those forces of the left which have historically viewed their role in terms of the capture of state power through electoral means, and the deployment of its instruments to socially progressive and economically just ends? Both of these questions have informed Tony Blair's current efforts to renovate and modernise the culture and organisation of the Labour Party.

Labour in British society

Blair's ideas emerge in part from a tradition with its roots outside the Labour Party. The idea that new sorts of issues and campaigns are displacing the old political forms has been an important catalyst for the re-emergence of the notion of civil society on the left since the 1960s. Until recently, arguments about the increasing importance of movements emerging outside the political system, as well as debates concerning the value of communities in social life, took place in intellectual circles outside the party. Whilst Labour has been deeply shaped by the particular evolution of Britain's social and economic history and political culture, it has historically drawn strength from cutting the party off from trends, movements and cultures beyond itself. To some extent this was a necessary part of the process of seeking and maintaining an independent identity. In other respects it marked a deep suspicion towards other political struggles and forces, especially those which have remained beyond its immediate sphere of influence.

Despite the heterogeneity of social interests which the party has incorporated throughout the century, it has adopted structures and developed a culture which sustain a highly statist conception of political change and social action. These features have frustrated radicals since the party's inception. One of the most radical aspects of Tony Blair's reforming project stems from his attack upon Labour members' instinctive reliance upon the state to provide solutions to contemporary
social problems, as well as his desire to reshape the insular culture which prevails
in Labour's ranks. This project, sometimes caricatured as a knee-jerk imitation of
New Right ideological commitments, actually carries echoes of longstanding radical
criticisms of the party's culture and structures, though earlier radicals never
imagined that such changes would be so energetically pursued by the party's elite.
One of the most longstanding and debilitating consequences of the capture of the
Labour Party by the culture of labourism has been the distance between its policy
thinking and deep-seated changes within Britain's society and economy in the last
thirty years.

This gap has encouraged a series of radical ventures which have emerged from
within the party and beyond. These have sought to reform or reconstitute party
culture and organisation - from the New Left of the early 1960s to Charter '88,
the magazine *Marxism Today* and the SDP of the 1980s. Each in their very different
ways tried to reconnect the party to the energies and aspirations of groups beyond
its boundaries. All were fascinated by social change, sharing the conviction that
Labour had lost touch with the real story of British fortunes in the post-war period
- including the relative decline of its industrial performance, and the impact of
important social changes which were producing identities and concerns within
the social arena from which the party remained aloof. Each of these currents has
in different ways provided ingredients for the Blairite programme. One important
point of intersection between these different reforming ventures has been their
advocacy of the concept of civil society, to signify both the realms of life which
the left should be addressing, and the kind of broad political coalition which it
needed to envisage.

**The new left alternative**

The first generation of the New Left in the late 1950s began the process of thinking
through the limitations of Labour's statism. In doing so the movement's leading
intellectuals anticipated many subsequent arguments on the left about civil society.
A particularly important aspect of its politics stemmed from the internationally
comparative approach it adopted in its analysis of British society. Youthful New
Left devotees in the early 1960s were more excited by the civil rights struggles in
the southern states of the United States, revolts against French colonial rule in
Algeria, the popular uprisings launched against Soviet rule in Hungary, and the
disastrous Suez expedition, than by events at home, though the emergence of the
first wave of CND provided some kind of indigenous equivalent. This international outlook was an important feature of the 'new politics' which the New Left pioneered, and shaped the notions of protest, political action and social space which became issues of great interest to subsequent generations. For the first time in the post-war period, Britain's patterns of social and economic development were systematically and unfavourably compared with events elsewhere. And an important lineage of thinking was established, about the relationships between the 'ancien regime' entrenched in the British state and faltering economic performance (ironically in a period when the British economy was positively robust in comparison with subsequent developments).\(^\text{1}\) This has become a rich and highly influential source of debate and reflection, providing one of the points of origin of Will Hutton's recent best-seller, *The State We're In.*\(^\text{2}\) Debates sponsored by the early New Left have become the staples of today: is British culture being remorselessly Americanised? is consumerism eroding older social values? can the ethos of community offer forms of resistance to the new economic forces and values sweeping across British society? The origins of the contemporary civil society tradition are worth noting because of the extent to which aspects of this agenda have been lost in latter-day discussions.

**The new social movements**

The New Left were by no means the only grouping on the political scene of the 1960s to assert their distaste for the limitations of the political system. The 'new' movements which arose in different ways from the radical milieu of student politics in the 1960s, notably the women's and anti-Vietnam war movements, began to reshape the landscape of modern British politics. So too did the anti-racist, lesbian and gay, and different environmentalist campaigns of subsequent decades, though the second wave of CND in the early 1980s was perhaps the most spectacularly influential of all these movements. These and other new campaigns and struggles have all developed in divergent directions, and have their own complicated histories. Yet all share a similar rejection of the narrowness

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of the terms of debate in the political mainstream. One of the most important aspects of these movements was the sense of worth they attached to domains previously downgraded in political analysis - the everyday, the emotional, and the non-human environment for example. The particular challenges that they have in different ways posed to British institutions and culture make them more than single-issue adjuncts to the political systems - a rather patronising description with which they are often labelled. For example, under the influence of movements such as feminism and anti-racism, it has been far less plausible to regard society as a passive, malleable sphere, organised around pre-given identities that the party in power can manipulate at will.

The Gramscian tradition
The New Left's emphases on both understanding and mobilising within civil society carried far more conviction in the wake of these movements which refused to play by conventional political rules and explicitly sought to reshape values and cultures. The notion of civil society thus came into vogue in the 1970s, following the dissemination of the ideas of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci conceived civil society as the defining characteristic of states in Western Europe, famously conceptualising the different institutions, cultures and practices which constituted this realm in the language of military strategy. His ideas about the war of position which the left needed to conduct across a range of fronts contributed to some important rethinking of socialist goals and political tactics. This perspective reached its apogee in the 1980s as Thatcherism sought to build exactly the kind of hegemonic project throughout civil society that those influenced by Gramsci had begun to envisage. Seeking to reshape the prevailing patterns of values and identities within the nation in conjunction with its radical governmental programme, the New Right sought to embed its core values in the 'common sense' of everyday life, articulated in an expressive and popular vernacular. It also tried to reposition the different social identities prevalent within British society around its own rather crude politics of identity - stressing a highly exclusive conception of the English nation, a narrow conception of 'economic man', and calling for the renovation of some deeply conservative moral traditions. Labour's apparent inability to understand, let alone respond to, these disturbing moves, returned civil society decisively to the political agenda of many radicals. These themes were explored throughout this period in the journal Marxism Today.
The left conservative' position

The experiences of Thatcherism have also encouraged a rather different interpretation of concepts such as civil society and community.

The response of some intellectuals to the changes wrought by Thatcherism has been to suggest that Labour should now occupy the conservative flank in British politics. Whilst the radical right sought to open both economy and society to the cold winds of global competition and seemed to care little about the deep divisions and different forms of social exclusion which these processes have brought, the left has been increasingly tempted to stand for what is permanent and continuous in people's lives, offering security and tradition in the wake of the 'permanent revolution' which the New Right oversaw. Community, in Blair's hands, offers a similar emphasis upon a comforting past characterised by stability and order. These ideas draw on a quite different lineage of civil society theory, which has been championed by more explicitly conservative advocates of the merits and stability provided by specifically English social institutions and values.

These different views by no means exhaust the different usages of civil society discourse. But both represent highly influential interpretations of it, and illustrate the potency of the view that politics needs to be fundamentally reconceived in the wake of the triumph of civil society. Some proponents of these ideas regarded the seismic political events of 1989 as signalling not just the demise of state-sponsored socialism but the final victory of civil society over modern states; some deemed it 'natural' that citizens should desire to live in a rich, multifarious and pluralistic social environment in which their varied needs and identities are addressed within different institutional contexts. According to this line of argument, all totalising ideologies which seek to establish fixed identities for individuals and rigid forms of social closure have become redundant. The notion of a political project from above which harnesses and reorganises the identities of its subjects to its own ends is thus increasingly problematic. Simultaneously, the legitimacy of the state, in a whole range of functions such as policing, welfare provision, and education, has become much harder to secure. For many, these changes now provide the defining political theme of the age - the limitations of state dirigisme in social and economic policy combined with a rejection of grand ideological visions.

and programmes. These and other related arguments point to the resurgence of civil society as one of the central phenomena of late modern politics.

This has been reflected since the mid-1980s in the growth of intellectual interest in this topic, reaching a crescendo with the publication of texts like John Keane's impressive edited collection, Civil Society and the State.\(^4\) Increasing attention has been paid to the limitations of state activity in societies on both the left and right, as well as the extent to which the preservation, enlargement and diversification of civil society represents important ways forward for democratic politics. The development of civil societies 'like ours' featured prominently in academic and political discussions of the processes of democratisation in contexts such as Latin America in the 1980s and Eastern Europe after 1989.

**The trouble with civil society**

Though there are too many variants of these arguments to elaborate here, some shared, and highly problematic, assumptions underpin the resurgence of civil society and communitarian discourse. A common belief is that these represent relatively benign, and sometimes inherently progressive spaces. In the 'left conservative' version of this argument, the institutions which embody security and maintain continuity in social life have tended to be assumed rather than analysed. But for the new movements which have appeared since the 1960s, it is exactly these institutions and their cultures which need to be challenged - from the House of Lords to the model of the nuclear family. As feminism in particular has shown, the ways in which power is dispersed throughout social domains engenders a continual process of negotiation, containment and occasionally explicit conflict.

For those who have stressed the organic connections between the growth of the new social movements and the emergence of powerful civil societies, some equally unhelpful assumptions prevail, not least the view that the concerns of these movements might contribute to a coherent alternative politics which takes place outside the state. A careful examination of the different circumstances in which new movements have emerged reveals the degree to which their fortunes have

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varied depending on the social and political structures facing them. This suggests that the state remains a highly significant context for movement politics, a finding confirmed by a recent comparative study of new movements in different West European states. In Britain, the agendas of the new movements have sometimes been hived off by the policy-making community and social movement organisations co-opted into new policy coalitions. But on other occasions, movement organisations function as outsiders seeking to destabilise the way in which policy is made and sold to the electorate. Both Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have played these different roles. In some situations, movement organisations have operated as relatively conventional pressure groups, or have expended a vast amount of energy on gaining access to the state via political parties. In other cases, they have been shut out of the political process altogether. These different state responses have fragmented these movements enormously and exacerbated a number of fundamental ideological differences within them - between deeper, more fundamentalist greens, and their lighter, more pragmatic wing for example.

The creative and varied responses of different movements, and sub-groups within them, to these conditions are equally important. Some have always been highly sceptical of the political system, and have experimented with more radical types of tactics and political styles. Others have built alternative cultural enclaves which rely heavily on collective forms of solidarity and new forms of economic enterprise, evident in the rapid creation of a number of gay villages and businesses in some British cities. In fact, the range of movement politics within Britain defies any simple characterisation, and certainly does not readily fit the 'anti-politics' model offered by different theorists over the last twenty years.

This is not to deny the integral relationship between campaigns and movements which spring from localities and issues outside the mainstream system and contemporary civil society. But the connections are more complex and politically ambiguous than is often claimed. This is illustrated too by the appearance of new movements of a more conservative and sometimes reactionary bent - including anti-abortion, fundamentalist Christian and other far-right groups. These have also

embedded themselves within different societies, and seek to enforce particularly exclusive forms of social closure which fly in the face of the benign, pluralistic model of civil society favoured by some on the left. The forces that have grown within the social systems of the industrialised states in the last twenty years have unleashed struggles over identity which point in different political and cultural directions, and are more multidimensional than is often suggested. The dream of a core of progressive movements animating a civil society in which the state does not play a regulatory role looks less likely and less attractive given these developments.

**Economic power and social identity**

Indeed it is not just the state that needs to remain within contemporary assessments of civil society. The economy, and the manner in which its operations interact with other domains of power and representation, should also be central to civil society arguments. Both civil society and community are frequently conceived as spheres where capitalist forms do not prevail. One of the strongest legacies of New Left and neo-marxist analyses has been the belief that emancipation means the defeat of, or escape from, the logic of the market. This notion, shaped by the romantic addition of opposition to utilitarian thinking, and revived in reaction to the forms of economistic marxism which once prevailed on the left, held that only when the utilitarian representation of human life propelled by market relations was replaced by a social ethos corresponding to shared human interests and solidarity, would emancipation be possible. Unfortunately this view reproduces, rather than transcends, the artificial separation of economic power from social identities and cultural values which sustained economistic versions of marxism. In reality, the economy is deeply intertwined with the cultural, symbolic and political worlds; the degree of emancipation or domination which emerges from economic processes depends upon the social and cultural contexts in which markets work and the ways in which economic outcomes are regulated. On the radical left, the economy has either been wholly sidelined or erected into the intellectual horizon beyond which no analysis will pass - the ultimate causal force. Thinking through the ideological, cultural and social ‘construction’ of economic processes and spaces has, consequently, been neglected. As the success of the New Right demonstrated, however, in the struggles over identity prevalent in late modern societies, important values like liberty and justice carry a strongly economic dimension, whilst simultaneously connecting with cultural values and social aspirations. The growth
Soundings

of consumerism as an important social practice illustrates the weaknesses of conceiving only non-economic spheres as ones where moral values apply. The growth of ‘ethical consumerism’ is one of the most important phenomena of our times.

Rethinking citizenship

The notions of civil society and community have opened all sorts of conceptual and political doors for the left. Both have offered the theoretical possibility of resolving the increasingly marked tensions between individual interests and the public good which characterise contemporary social development. As different commentators have observed, a commitment to a truly civic society implies the creation of collective values and an ethos of public service and participation which works against the acquisitive and self-interested privatism at the heart of late modern societies. Whilst sections of the left began to grapple with these difficult issues towards the end of the 1980s, a model of citizenship appropriate to the patterns of social life which will prevail in the twenty-first century remains elusive. Blair’s communitarianism is one response to this problem, representing a bold reassertion of the bonds and loyalties that bind individuals in their very most immediate locales. But whether this offers more than a nostalgic fantasy in the context of the irreversible changes which have occurred in the last twenty years remains less clear.

For thinkers like Gramsci, or the contemporary Italian theorist Norberto Bobbio, the notion of civil society has allowed a deeper analytical engagement with the complex ways in which social identities are produced in modern societies. But this emphasis appears to have been lost in some recent invocations of the term. In particular, the complex interactions between the different domains of power which shape individual identities, as well as the changing relationships between institutions and individuals, are the axes along which some of the most important changes in recent times have occurred. Debates about citizenship or community need to incorporate the very different contexts in which individuals operate, as well as the various locations at which identities are formed and contested - simultaneously through urban subcultures, national cultural affiliations, and global concerns, for example. The problem for advocates of civil society is that this concept and its related values were first developed by thinkers of earlier eras who were far more confident about the common interests and values which could underpin a model of citizenship which was meaningful to all. These assumptions have been substantially undermined by the complex patterns of
differentiation prevalent in late twentieth-century social life. The different forms and levels of contemporary social interaction have to be brought into any meaningful model of the public good in the civil society of the next century.

**Bringing the state back in**

In general, the dualistic conception of states and societies which the notion of civil society has sometimes encouraged offers a rather inadequate framework for understanding political and social life. Given the changes in state-society relationships typical of all industrialised states in the 1980s, this is especially so. The state's involvement in its subjects' lives is today far more extensive and pervasive than at any previous period, despite the widespread acceptance of the state's limitations in so many fields. Whilst civil society has undoubtedly grown more diverse, rich and dense in its institutional networks and sub-cultural possibilities, and includes cultures which have become tremendously fragmented, the state's dealings with society have become more extensive and restrictive in areas of personal morality and behaviour. Yet, simultaneously, the legitimacy of state intervention in some spheres of social and economic life has been substantially eroded. This last development is perhaps the most powerful factor undermining a conception of politics based on a counterposition between civil society, or community, and the state. The linkages between these spheres cannot be registered by arguments which assume a neat division between them. The analysis of radicals now has to reflect the contours of the new political economy which will characterise the twenty-first century: the artificial separation of state, economy and society not only hinders a proper understanding of the world into which we are moving, but hampers our conception of the kind of politics which can genuinely provide alternatives at different locations and scales of social life.

In particular, the premature death notices which have appeared for the nation state represent a misleading gloss on some complex developments. In Britain especially, as David Marquand and Anthony Wright have argued, a tremendous degree of power remains within the confines of the state.” Even in terms of the agendas developed by the most radical movements in civil society, the state implicitly figures as a social and economic regulator, as the potential guarantor of hard-won equality legislation, or, in the case of the environment, as a key agent in

Soundings

the construction of more sustainable macro-economic strategies. Certainly the gulf which has widened enormously between the drift of contemporary social developments - the decline of social deference for example - and the world of conventional politics, does illustrate some fundamental problems with the latter. But the logic of the argument outlined here is that alternative politics, however radically anti-statist, cannot afford to give up on the state and the economy if prevailing forms of power are to be both understood and transformed. The goal of greater democratisation, which underpins many accounts of the rise of civil society, needs to be conceived beyond the increasingly stale dichotomy between self-activity on the one hand and state regulation and intervention on the other. In fact, the exploration of different kinds of relationship between the state, social agents and social problems lies at the heart of the political agenda now facing radicals.

In certain respects, the ideologues of New Labour seem to grasp this: the notion of the stakeholder economy offers a new language of partnership between different social and economic interests, with the state playing a more strategically 'intelligent' role in its interventions and modes of regulation. But this 'partnership' model, which Blair also uses to characterise industrial relations under a future Labour government, tends to ignore the very real imbalances of power which structure the relationships between the various partners. The stakeholder notion is only meaningful if these asymmetries are seriously addressed - by tackling the thorny questions of corporate governance for instance. Equally, the partnership model can provide a way of displacing tough questions about social rights, obligations and duties on to communities which do not have the slightest chance of tackling them, without external resources and co-operation.

Whilst New Labour's rhetoric is mantra-like in its stress upon its own novelty, it is undoubtedly a mistake to disconnect too rapidly from history on the assumption that present problems bear no relationship to those in the past. In certain ways, contemporary radicals can learn much from earlier thinkers who reflected on the nature of social change and state power. Blair himself has pointed to forgotten traditions of self-activity and co-operation within the left. Equally, the usages to which civil society and community were put by earlier theorists deserve reconsideration. In the case of the New Left traditions outlined above - and the same could be said of

Gramsci - it is worth noting that some of the leading intellectuals from this movement regarded the expansion of the political as essential to the rethinking of socialism well before the new movements had come of age. In their different ways, thinkers like Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams, Juliet Mitchell, Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn and Stuart Hall never lost sight of the particular significance of the power exercised within the state, and its interactions with other social relations. In the cases of Nairn and Anderson, whose highly influential thesis on British decline has substantially altered the intellectual agenda of the last two decades, their arguments transcended conventional divisions between economic and cultural analyses. These may be selective examples - and they are not offered to suggest that all of these ideas were correct or remain pertinent - but they do illustrate the degree to which subsequent thinking about civil society has been impaled by some simplistic binary divisions - state v society, old v new politics, community v economy - which hinder rather than help the formation of an agenda appropriate to today's conditions.

**Conclusion: the New Left in the time of New Labour?**

Many of these issues have appeared in different guises in recent arguments about New Labour's political agenda. But the latter's relationship to the changing relationships between state and society remains ambivalent. As noted earlier, Blair's mission is in many respects highly radical, seeking to reshape some of the core assumptions about politics and social action which have sustained generations of Labour activists. Equally there is a genuine commitment to developing new thinking about alternative forms of public provision and state-society co-operation. Careful assessment of these commitments does suggest that in certain respects Blair is not wholly removed from, and may indeed have been influenced by, earlier voices on the left which have mounted powerful critiques of the politics of the 'old left'. The critique is, at points, only superficially similar, and is connected to a different politics, but overlaps between the different traditions are significant. The New Left and New Labour both retain a belief in the significance of constitutional reform - however watered down in the latter's case - and regard it as a prerequisite for economic and social modernisation. Equally the openness to issues beyond Labour's traditional repertoire which New Labour sometimes manifests - most recently on the environment - suggests a greater sensitivity to the 'post-materialist' issues which the New Left has often advocated. Such echoes raise some tricky questions for those who see themselves within the 'third road' tradition on the British left, and the similarities are strenuously
denied by some. But the ambivalence which characterises the response of many 'radicals' to Blair, is an indication of the recognition of aspects of this radical lineage in his politics, combined with a lingering suspicion about his political goals and motives.

But in other respects, New Labour's instincts remain deeply attuned to the rhythms and assumptions of a highly centralised and increasingly insular political system. New Labour has not broken from old Labour when it comes to thinking about political change. Blair and those around him might usefully heed a wider set of heterodox political voices from outside the party's inner circle. One intellectual current to which they might turn consists of New Left thinkers who have rejected labourist thinking throughout the last thirty years, and have explored the problems of state legitimacy, the need for a hegemonic conception of politics to provide a coherent philosophical underpinning for any new policy programme, and the centrality of the state within the unusual pattern of British economic and political development. Blair's communitarianism might therefore be supplemented with the recognition that bridges of trust, accountability and consent need to be rebuilt between public institutions and social groups - inherently difficult and painful tasks in this context. Equally, the significant potential for state-led modernisation in Britain was powerfully illustrated by the Thatcher governments. Both the globalisation thesis and the communitarian argument can provide easy ways of avoiding facing up to the realities, possibilities and dangers of state power.

Both the New Left and civil society lineages have rightly pointed to the increasing diversity of both the social terrain and the politics of opposition within modern societies. This emphasis might be usefully taken on board to supplant the traditional way in which the new forces emerging in British society are treated: campaigns, protest groups and voluntary associations whose political allegiances are not immediately obvious are generally regarded as single-issue supplicants within the Blair camp. Contact with these forces, according to this mentality, means electoral risk and future claims on the public purse. Blair may be right that economic realities dictate that expectations of what a Labour government can deliver need to be held within realistic boundaries. But securing and maintaining a popular mandate for a new policy agenda requires a more extensive dialogue with a diverse coalition of social groups and their representatives.

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Get access to Pro version of "Deluge"! Ultimate Guitar Pro is a premium guitar tab service, available on PC, Mac, iOS and Android. Follows the stories of the four men of the Kirby family. As Alex's marriage breaks apart, Toby tries desperately to start a family, and Marty tries to kick-start his faded music career as well as find a meaningful relationship with someone his own age, all three must come to terms with their father's mental state. Cliff, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, is reliving his disturbing memories of the war and his first love, as a part of his experiences of the present. Through all four stories, we uncover a family's troubled past, and their struggle towards After the Deluge.


[1) The Announcement] It was a time when tyrants ruled the Earth. Mankind's malice showed no remorse. His self created empire troubled him mightily. All pursuit of honor was so mighty. A father of three sons, called Noah, appeared. Inspired by God and religious, He shall be rescued from all that wanted flesh. Flying with sons, women, and beasts.

[2) ...The beginning (Invasion of the deluge)]