

The third way revealed

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SOMETIMES you want to read a book a second time. You know, just to make sure that there was nothing important you missed first time around. In the end, though, Bagehot decided to skip the second reading of Anthony Giddens's "The Third Way", published this week by Polity Press. For the time being, first impressions must stand. This book is awesomely, magisterially and in some ways disturbingly vacuous.

Why disturbing? There are many bad books in the world. But the third way is not just a parlour game for intellectuals puzzling over the content of politics now that both socialism and "unbridled" capitalism are in disrepute. It has become the quasi-official political philosophy of Britain's governing party, and is taken seriously enough to form the backdrop for a curious political seminar that Bill and Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair and Romano Prodi, the prime minister of Italy, plan to conduct in New York on September 23rd. Nor is "The Third Way" just any other book about what the third way is. It is the first detailed account of it by the man who has become its chief British prophet and interpreter. Even by the standards of the London School of Economics, which provided a base for the likes of Friedrich Hayek, the Webbs and Harold Laski, its present director exerts a powerful influence on Downing Street. Of Mr Giddens (who, thanks to Mr Blair, shall be Lord Giddens hereafter), as of no other living sociologist, it can be said that what he thinks matters.

So what does he think? A large part of "The Third Way" consists of a description of where things stand after the death of socialism. Mr Giddens homes in on "five dilemmas". In merciful summary, these are (1) that globalisation is changing the meanings of nationhood, government and sovereignty. There exists (2) a "new individualism" that is not necessarily selfish but which means that social solidarity can no longer be imposed in a top-down way. Although distinctions between left and right keep changing, the left cares more about social justice and equality. However, (3), there is a category of problems—such as global warming, devolution, the future of the European Union—about which it is unhelpful to think in terms of left versus right. (4) Some jobs (defence, lawmaking) can be done only by governments, even though politicians are becoming less influential and pressure groups more effective. And do not forget (5) that while environmental dangers can be exaggerated it is highly dangerous to be sanguine about them, not least because, as in the case of mad-cow disease, experts sometimes differ.

Hmm. At this point, the charitable reader may feel that although some of these points may be obvious, and others arguable, Mr Giddens has at least raised interesting questions. Moreover, they are original, in the narrow sense that nobody else seems to have singled out these particular five points and called them “dilemmas”. The trouble with any argument constructed at Mr Giddens's level of generalisation is that you begin to wonder whether there might just as plausibly have been four dilemmas, or 14, or even whether a different five could have been chosen just as easily (Lester Thurow, an economist at MIT, detected five different world-transforming “tectonic plates” in his own book on capitalism's future not two years ago). But let that pass. Philosophers describe the world. How does the prophet of Britain's third way propose to change it?

Mr Giddens admits that what he is offering is merely an “outline”. This is a deceptive species of modesty given that what he claims to be outlining is no less than “an integrated political programme covering each of the major sectors of society.” Here we learn amongst other things that protectionism is undesirable but so is a “blanket endorsement” of free trade; that there should be no rights without responsibilities; that the protection of children is the most important bit of family policy; that society should be “inclusive” but not “strongly egalitarian”; that constitutions should aim for openness and transparency; that there may be a case for a world criminal court; that there is a need to control excessive overshoots in financial markets but that the nature of these controls is “problematic”; that

But, really, why bother to go on? There is nothing as tiresome as iconoclasm for its own sake, and Mr Giddens can hardly be accused of that. But it would have been nice for Britain's pre-eminent sociologist and the director of the LSE to come up with at least one new proposal capable of ruffling at least someone's feathers. Remember “The Road to Serfdom”, Hayek's brave, hugely unfashionable warning against planning made in the midst of a war that seemed to have made planners indispensable? By contrast, Mr Giddens's integrated political programme boils down to a list of conventional appeals to civic virtue, in which every bet is hedged and every hard choice ducked. It is just the sort of stuff that could find its way risklessly into the manifesto of any social democratic party interested in tarding up its image.

Which is presumably why he wrote it. Mr Giddens wants to restore the LSE to a position of power and influence. How pleasing it must have been to find in Tony Blair a clever, instinctive politician in the market for some sort of ideology in which to dress up his opportunism. And how intellectually disarming. Was it fear of setting out any positions that New Labour could one day find embarrassing that made Mr Giddens write such a bad book? Whatever the reason, the third way remains as mystifying as ever. Herbert Morrison—the grandfather of Peter Mandelson, Mr Blair's cabinet colleague—once wickedly defined socialism as what the Labour Party did. On the evidence of this slight work, the third way is whatever New Labour does.

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