

Reassessing Britain's 'Post-War Consensus': The Politics of Reason, 1945 – 1979.

Since the late-1970s, scholars have been engaged in a vibrant debate about the nature of post-war British politics. While some writers have suggested that the three decades that succeeded the Second World War witnessed a bi-partisan consensus on key policy questions, others have argued that it was conflict, not agreement, that marked the period. This article offers a novel contribution to this controversy by drawing attention to the epistemological beliefs of the Labour and Conservative parties. It argues that once these beliefs are considered, it becomes possible to reconcile some of the competing claims made by proponents and critics of the 'post-war consensus' thesis. Labour and Conservative leaders may have been wedded to different beliefs, but they also shared a common enthusiasm for empiricist reasoning and were both reluctant to identify fixed political 'ends' that they sought to realise. Consequently, they were both committed to evolutionary forms of change, and they eschewed the notion that any social or political arrangement was of universal value.

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In politics the way things are done matters more than what is done.

Bryan Magee (1962)

I will join you in the fight against Socialist dogmatism wherever it rears its head. But do not ask me to oppose it with an equal or opposite Conservative dogmatism.

Edward Boyle (1972)

It is now forty years since Paul Addison (1975) published his seminal study of wartime Britain, yet scholars continue to debate the validity of the thesis that it popularised. Addison's central argument was that the Second World War, which placed new demands upon the state and fostered popular enthusiasm for collectivist forms of social provision, witnessed the emergence of a 'Whitehall consensus' on key policy questions. Its central pillars were the Beveridgean welfare state, a mixed economy and a Keynesian economic strategy, and it was informed by a set of aspirations that were broadly social democratic in character.¹ Addison did not offer an

expansive discussion of post-war politics, but he did suggest that the consensus he described had endured until the mid-1970s.

From the late-1980s, a number of studies (Jones, 1996; Pimlott, 1989) challenged Addison's thesis.² These critiques took different forms. While some accounts (Kerr, 2001) exposed significant policy changes that took place in the post-war period, others (Marlow, 1996) suggested that consensus narratives had concealed significant aspects of political contestation. But common to several of them was an argument about the main parties' political thought. Far from sharing some common assumptions and beliefs, the Labour and Conservative parties, they argued, were wedded to different ideologies. Particular attention was devoted to the parties' views regarding the distribution of wealth and social status. While the former had been committed to creating a more equal social order, their Conservative opponents, it was argued, had sought to preserve certain forms of inequality. Accordingly, these studies challenged the notion that continuity in the realm of public policy reflected any meaningful ideological agreement. What followed was something of a historiographical stalemate. Some scholars, despite acknowledging that ideological conflict was a feature of the period, argued that because this conflict was contained within a set of ideational parameters, it remained possible to identify a relative, rather than absolute, consensus (Dutton, 1991; Hay, 1996; Lowe, 1996). Other writers (Marlow, 1996; Kerr, 2001), by contrast, suggested that the disputes between the Labour and Conservative parties were so fundamental that the term consensus could not adequately describe the post-war political order.

The following article traces one potential route out of this impasse.³ It does so by exploring a feature of Britain's intellectual politics that was largely ignored by the above literature, namely the epistemological beliefs that informed the Labour and Conservative parties' political thought. It will be argued that once adequate attention is devoted to these beliefs, it becomes possible to reconcile some of the competing claims that have been offered

by proponents and critics of the consensus thesis; for doing so demonstrates that while the parties offered different conceptions of desirable political change, their ideological contestation was partially contained by their common understandings of human reason. Not only did the dominant intellectual formations within the two parties share a common enthusiasm for empiricist modes of reasoning, but they were also reluctant to specify fixed ‘ends’ that they sought to realise. In turn, they tended to prefer evolutionary reform, and they were both hostile to the notion that any individual or party could possess a monopoly of truth. Identifying this epistemological convergence is not, in itself, sufficient to demonstrate the existence or otherwise of a post-war consensus. What it may suggest, however, is that if such a consensus did exist, we might have been looking for it in the wrong places.

After providing brief descriptions of the ideological formations that shaped the main parties’ thought in the post-war period, the discussion pursues three lines of enquiry. First, it identifies the assumptions that informed the Labour and Conservative parties’ understandings of human reason and explores their implications for their broader political thought. Second, it interrogates the way in which these assumptions informed their understandings of the social order. And finally, it demonstrates how the parties’ attitudes towards the concept of equality were mediated by epistemological concerns.

Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy

Throughout the post-war period, the Labour and Conservative parties were intellectual coalitions. Indeed they both hosted a range of ideological traditions that competed with one another for authority. But of these traditions, two can be said to have achieved hegemony within their respective parties: ‘Middle Way Conservatism’ and ‘revisionist socialist democracy’.⁴ Each will be described briefly.

The origins of Middle Way Conservatism can be traced to the late inter-war period, when some Conservatives began to challenge the classical economic ideas that had informed inter-war economic policy. Perhaps the most notable was Harold Macmillan. In response to the phenomenon of mass unemployment, Macmillan (1938) came to advocate a ‘middle way’ economic strategy that could reconcile capitalist enterprise and social justice by employing the state to repair the vagaries of the price mechanism.⁵ Following the Conservatives’ defeat in the 1945 election, a number of younger Conservatives, including David Clarke, Quintin Hogg, R.A. Butler and Ian Macleod, embraced similar ideas. Rehearsing arguments that had been articulated by Burke, they argued (Hogg, 1947, pp. 24-30, p. 250) that the principal task of Conservatism was to create an ‘identity of interest between all classes’. And because they believed that social deprivation threatened to erode the unity of the organic social order, they accepted the Beveridgean welfare state and identified full employment as the principal objective of economic policy. Indeed they argued that if the burdens of war were not equally shared, the harmony of the social order could be disturbed (Hogg, 1944, pp. 56-57). Together, these figures were instrumental in shifting the balance of forces within the parliamentary party, and by 1951, they had significantly modified the party’s policy programme (Gamble, 1975, pp. 38-57). Here, the publication of *The Industrial Charter* (Conservative Party, 1947) was particularly significant. As well as detailing a corporatist industrial policy, this document also acknowledged the need for some industries to remain under public ownership.

An organicist conception of the social order informed Middle Way Conservatives’ political thinking (Clarke, 1947, p. 12; Hogg, 1947, p. 24). Human communities, they argued, were comparable to living organisms, for like such organisms, they were comprised of interdependent components whose existence depended on their mutual co-operation. Two basic commitments followed from this understanding of the social order: a desire to unite different

social groups and a commitment to preserving the institutions and practices that were conducive to social stability.

Revisionist social democracy emerged in the immediate post-war period and gained momentum following Labour's successive defeats in the 1951 and 1955 General Elections. At the core of its ideological architecture was a particular understanding of post-war capitalism (Reisman, 1997, pp. 53-54; Crosland, 1956; Jay, 1960). Far from being the exploitative entity that Marx had described, the capitalist order, it was argued, had been rendered benign by changes in the productive system. Not only had the emergence of a managerial class weakened the relationship between ownership and control, but the expansion of trade union authority had also transferred a significant degree of power to the labour movement. This sanguine reading of post-war capitalism led revisionists to question the efficacy of some traditional socialist assumptions. They were particularly critical of the assumption that further measures of nationalisation would advance the socialist cause. A mixed economy, they argued, could be rendered compatible with egalitarian objectives (Crosland, 1956, pp. 56-78; Magee, 1962, p. 13).

Revisionists regarded a commitment to equality as the defining feature of their belief systems. Anthony Crosland (1956, p. 113) thus wrote that the distinctive socialist ideal was social equality, while Douglas Jay (1960, p. 7) stated that equality was the 'specifically socialist aim'. But for reasons that will be discussed below, revisionists were reluctant to specify a particular distribution of wealth that they believed was desirable. Instead, they suggested that the appropriate distribution of wealth at any moment should be determined on the basis of empirical enquiry. As Crosland (1974, p. 17) put it, '[a] practicing politician ... is not required to answer the stern examiner's question: how much equality ultimately?'⁶ Nor did revisionists believe that all forms of redistributive activity were commensurable with social equality.

Indeed they believed that further increases in taxation could impair productivity and, in turn, reduce the surplus available for public expenditure (Crosland, 2006, p. 168).

At this juncture, it must be noted that the authority of the above formations varied over time and that their influence over the main parties' policy programmes ebbed and flowed. It would thus be inappropriate to make general claims about the existence or otherwise of a post-war policy consensus by studying their respective epistemologies. What such an enquiry can expose, however, is that epistemological ideas often informed the political contestation of the post-war period. The article's intention, then, is not offer a general argument about the existence or otherwise of a post-war consensus. Rather, its intention is to demonstrate that if such a consensus did exist, it may have had an epistemological foundation.

Reason and Politics

We are now equipped with a vast literature that explores the thought of the Labour and Conservative parties (Beech and Hickson, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Hickson, 2005; Ellison, 1994; Green, 2002). What this literature has largely ignored, however, is the epistemological beliefs that informed the parties' thinking. And such an omission is significant, since it was these beliefs that mediated their respective attitudes to the discipline of politics and informed their approaches to governance (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 96). Before they could award a particular practice or value meaning and significance, both parties needed to establish what was knowable about both present conditions and the consequences of future activity, and they were thus required to draw upon beliefs about the nature of human reason and its appropriate uses.

Reason is a contested concept (Gallie, 1956; Freedman, 1996) that can be awarded a range of different meanings. And when they claim to be rational actors, individuals can engage in different kinds of thinking. It is useful, then, to draw a distinction between rationality and rationalism. While the former can be defined as the quality of being rational, the latter is a

particular mode of rationality that regards human reason as the supreme source of human knowledge. It is possible, then, for an actor to challenge rationalism in the name of rationality (see Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 5-42).

When we explore, in the abstract sense, the epistemologies of socialism and conservatism, we encounter a crucial distinction: whereas the conservative, who prefers the 'knowable to the unknowable', possesses no 'vision of the future', the socialist, by virtue of their rationalism, is committed to proposing measures that can realise a specified future (Freedon, 1996, p. 355).⁷ Yet the particular formations that this article is concerned with did not adhere to these general positions. Let us begin with revisionist social democracy. Instead of seeking to construct an abstract vision of the future that could be realised, revisionists were committed to empiricist modes of reasoning. Indeed they were suspicious of utopian modes of thought, and they eschewed the suggestion that the social order could be re-made in a new image.

Central to revisionists' thought was a critique of the epistemology that had informed orthodox Marxism. One of their principal objections concerned Marx's attempt to abstract a 'universal phenomenon' that governed the process of historical change (Durbin, 1940, p. 189). This aspiration, it was argued, was futile, for history was comprised of events that were unpredictable and whose causes were contingent rather than universal. This argument was posed with particular force by Bryan Magee (1962, p. 44), who wrote that: 'the truth is [that] ... in human affairs we can see only a short way ahead, and even then our predictions are highly fallible and often wrong.'⁸ This conception of history had significant implications for revisionists' understanding of appropriate political conduct. Most importantly, it led them to advocate a gradualist approach to politics, whereby incremental reform was preferred to radical change. One of the clearest justifications of this approach was offered by Crosland (1956, p. 314):

The essential argument for evolutionary change is that it allows one to be experimental, since the problems involved in change then unfold themselves at a speed which gives ample time for dealing with them ... One should never monkey around with society too much; if we do, we may find that history has some unpleasant surprises up its sleeve for us.

In place of the abstract theorising of Marxism, revisionists constructed an empiricist conception of rationality, whereby propositions were tested through empirical observation. Such an approach, it was argued, was valuable for two reasons. First, it guarded against the sort of utopian propositions that could be deduced from 'pre-scientific' modes of political thought. And second, it accommodated the change that was the only permanent feature of modern societies. Similar strands of reasoning can be identified in the writings of pre-war socialists (Cole, 1938, pp. 133-160). But while earlier socialists like John Strachey (1938, p. 386) had placed considerable faith in the capacity of human reason to theorise social phenomena, revisionists, under the influence of post-war positivism, offered a more sceptical conception of reason.⁹

Often, revisionists' sensitivity to the unpredictability of change led them to advocate a relativist approach to political questions. For if the consequences of change could not be anticipated, it followed that no particular arrangement or belief could be universally valuable. Hence Bryan Magee (1962, p. 37) doubted whether:

anything that is taken for granted now will still be taken for granted three thousand years from now. Therefore we should not hold our beliefs and assumptions with unalterable certitude. The best reason we can have for holding

them – the only good reason for holding them – is that they have stood up to critical examination so far, and stood up better than any known alternative.¹⁰

For Magee (1962, p. 44), the fallibility of reason compelled policy-makers to be receptive to the lessons of experience. It was inappropriate, he wrote, to ‘work out a theory that will tell us what to do in all future situations’. Instead, it was necessary to ‘assess the facts of each actual situation, and decide what to do in light of them’. Because they adhered to such beliefs, revisionists were also critical of the notion that the left had exclusive access to the truth. As Jeremy Nuttall (2005, pp. 671-672) has demonstrated, they were willing to acknowledge that some attitudes and characters of mind that were associated with Conservatism were of value. Moreover, they suggested that effective political action often emerged from the constructive inter-play of rival political forces. Douglas Jay (1960, p. 33) thus suggested that ‘the future for humanity will look a little less gloomy when those in either camp not merely recognise that the other genuinely admires its own strange ideal, but even that there is value in both’. Striking a similar note, Magee (1962, p. 47) reproduced the following statement from Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: ‘I have never seen any plan which has not been mended by the observations of those who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business.’¹¹

In many instances, revisionists’ thinking about rationality was shaped by their readings of Karl Popper’s early works. Magee (2010, p. 179) and Crosland were indebted to *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and complimentary references to Popper’s ideas can be found in most statements of revisionist thought.¹² A full summary of Popper’s epistemological ideas cannot be offered here, but it is instructive to outline the basic political propositions that followed from them. First, Popper, under the influence of Hume, argued that because no statement could be universally true, reason was a fallible faculty. It thus followed that the task of social science,

and indeed of rational politics, was not to understand society so that its future could be planned. Rather, it was to ‘study the unwieldiness, the resilience or the brittleness of the social stuff, of its resistance to our attempts to mould it and work with it’ (Parvin, 2013, p. 69). Second, Popper (1966, p. 157; Shearmur, 1996) offered a proposition regarding the appropriate nature of political reform. Because the consequences of a particular act could not be wholly anticipated, it was appropriate, he argued, for policy-makers to engage in piecemeal reform whose consequences could be subjected to empirical observation. Popper’s preference for such reformism stemmed from a critique of social engineering which sought to achieve an ‘ultimate end’. According to his reasoning (Popper, 1966, p. 162), such practices were deficient because there could be no rational method for determining the desirability of these ‘ultimate’ objectives. Finally, Popper offered an argument about the appropriate subject of rational enquiry. Unlike historicist thinkers, whose principal concern was to observe the laws of history, he suggested that social enquiry should study observable social institutions and arrangements. It followed that politics should be concerned with determining the purpose and efficiency of existing institutions and modifying them accordingly.

Significantly, these three propositions are broadly compatible with a conservative disposition, for they invite a mode of reasoning that ‘prefers the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect’ (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 408).¹³ Indeed Popper might have agreed with Oakeshott’s suggestion (1991, p. 60) that politics was an activity with ‘neither starting-place nor appointed destination.’ That is not to say that the full range of Popper’s ideas can be rendered compatible with conservative beliefs. There are some features of his thought, namely his suspicion of the concept of nationhood, which few conservatives would be willing to endorse. But his basic approach to epistemological questions was commensurable with the conservative’s suspicion of utopianism and their preference for

gradual, rather than radical, change. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Middle Way Conservatives were also receptive to Popper's epistemology. Here, it is instructive to make particular reference to Edward Boyle's thought, for he authored several appraisals of *The Open Society* over the course of the post-war period. Boyle's (1974, p. 844) basic argument was that Popper had established a 'middle way' between Stalinist logic and the reactionary responses to post-war welfarism. Indeed Popper's epistemology, he argued, had demonstrated the absurdity of both utopian rationalism and romanticist irrationalism. Boyle concluded that 'Popper's emphasis on criticism, on 'piecemeal' reform, and on evaluation of what was actually done, seemed to me just the corrective that was needed.' In part, Boyle's enthusiasm for *The Open Society* emerged from his sympathy with Popper's views regarding morality. In short, Popper believed that while the responsibility for our ethical decisions was 'entirely ours' and we should seek absolutely right or valid proposals', individuals should not persuade themselves that we have 'definitively found them'. Boyle (1974, pp. 851-852) approved of this proposition, and by drawing upon the work of another philosopher, A.J. Ayer, he offered a riposte to the notion that any normative proposition could be eternally valid.

These beliefs had important consequences for Boyle's broader understanding of politics. As well as leading him to place emphasis on the virtues of patience and moderation, they also compelled him to be suspicious of the notion that politics was a search for eternal truths. In 1974, when he delivered a speech to the OUCA on Conservative values (Boyle, 1974b), he offered the following statements in his notes:

Flexibility & adaptability ...

Scepticism [...] not too much quest for certainty.

Similar views were advanced by Ian Gilmour. The principal objective of the Tory party, Gilmour (1978, p. 125, p. 153) wrote, was to:

make trial of the age. It should be a benevolent inquisition, checking and questioning what is in appearance the dominant orthodoxy of the day ... This is all the more necessary since, as Karl Popper has pointed out, “nothing ever comes off exactly as intended”.

This statement deployed the same epistemological reasoning that could be found in Bryan Magee’s *The New Radicalism* and other revisionist texts. By preferring ‘benevolent inquisition’ to abstract theorising, Gilmour rehearsed the revisionists’ argument that empirical enquiry was the most adequate procedure for determining appropriate political activity.

When conducting their empirical investigations, revisionists and Conservatives could, of course, evaluate their evidence against different criteria. Put simply, what a revisionist regarded as a desirable outcome of a particular arrangement could, for the Conservative, constitute an undesirable one. But if revisionists and Middle Way Conservatives’ empirical investigations did not always lead them to the same arguments, their Popperite impulses did encourage them to seek ‘partial’ rather than ‘ultimate’ ends and to acknowledge the positive contributions that their opponents had made to public policy. Crosland (1956, p. 61) noted this feature of post-war politics in 1956, when he wrote that the ‘typically pragmatic and empirical’ Conservative party had come to accept many of the reforms that had been introduced by the Attlee governments: ‘Nostalgically as Conservatives may think back to particular features of that [inter-war] era, such as the low taxation, they could hardly, by any feat of self-deception, beget a deep emotional devotion to pre-war society as a whole, or convince themselves that the

1930s were a glorious age'. In turn, he (Crosland, 1962, p. 238) argued that many of the 'burning issues of the past' had come to assume a rather marginal character.

Crosland's description of his political opponents was certainly valid. Because they were suspicious of rationalist conceptions of knowledge, Middle Way Conservatives were also critical of the notion that any particular party or individual could possess a monopoly of truth. And in turn, they eschewed the notion that the appropriate response to a harmful body of beliefs was to oppose them with antipodal ones. Such a proposition was evident in Edward Boyle's (Boyle and Crosland, 1972, p. 18) speech to the Conservatives' 1968 conference:

I will join you in the fight against Socialist dogmatism wherever it rears its head. But do not ask me to oppose it with an equal or opposite Conservative dogmatism, because in education, it is the dogmatism itself which is wrong.

Similar reasoning can be identified in Francis Pym's (1984, p. 172) *The Politics of Consent*, in which Pym challenged the ideas that informed the Thatcher government's economic policy. 'One consequence of Socialism,' Pym wrote, 'has been to encourage Conservatives to see themselves primarily as anti-Socialists. This can lead to a mistaken tendency to substitute one ideology for another'. For both Boyle and Pym, then, the adequate response to dogmatic politics was not to construct an alternative ideology that was its opposite. Such an enterprise, they argued, would be informed by the same rationalist fallacies that informed socialist dogmatism. The preferred procedure was to construct a programme of reform that could neutralise the appeal of dogmatic politics.¹⁴

When pursuing such strategies, Middle Way Conservatives often sought to construct a dialogue with the forces of the left. As Quintin Hogg (1947, p. 13) put it, '[Conservatives] feel themselves entitled to make use of the true lessons taught by their opponents ... There is no

copyright in truth and what is controversial politics at one moment may after experience and reflections easily become common ground.’ In a draft version of the text from which this statement was extracted, Hogg (1946) went as far as to suggest that the function of Conservatism was to provide a Hegelian synthesis in the midst of adversarial struggle:

The function of Conservatism is to present a synthesis, that is to say, not a compromise between two conflicting purposes and principles, since political compromise means a bargain struck in which each side for the sake of peace abandons part of what they logically claim, but a genuine reconciliation of the two conflicting principles based on a more profound analysis and a higher level of thought.

Pym (1984, p. 191) produced a similar formulation in his aforementioned text. Reflecting on the rise of Thatcherism, he appealed for a ‘balanced’ system of politics that could reconcile the competing claims of its constituent components: ‘two opposed extremes do not create harmony, just as two wrongs do not make a right’. To legitimate this arrangement, Pym (1984, p. 177) offered a challenge to the Thatcherite critique of ‘consensus politics’. Consensus politics did not, as Thatcher had suggested, reflect the ‘lowest common denominator of all viewpoints’. It instead concerned the ‘means by which the policy is agreed and implemented’.¹⁵

At this juncture, it is instructive to note that Middle Way Conservatives’ challenge to Thatcher’s project was epistemological in nature. Indeed their criticism of Thatcher’s approach to politics was not only rooted in concerns about her policies; it also stemmed from a disagreement with the epistemology that informed them (Gilmour, 1992, pp. 331-33). Thatcher’s mistaken assumption, it was argued, was that a particular mechanism, the market, could be a panacea to the social and economic problems that Britain had encountered. It

followed that far from being a Conservative, Thatcher was an ideologue who had reproduced the same rationalist logic that was present in the ideology she reviled. That is not to say, of course, that Middle Way Conservatism was not itself an ideology. In offering a critique of what they perceived to be Thatcherite rationalism, its advocates were articulating their own epistemological beliefs and assumptions. But it is notable that these beliefs and assumptions were so central to their understanding of Conservatism's appropriate function.

To legitimate their commitment to pluralist politics, Middle Way Conservatives often suggested that there was a mutually inclusive relationship between consensus and continuity. A virtuous arrangement or practice, it was argued, could only be preserved if there was a shared understanding of the meanings and lessons of its past. And establishing such a shared understanding required the diffusion of power between the 'various interests which make up the present (Patten, 1983, p. 18).¹⁶ This did not, of course, lead them to regard the absence of disagreement as a political objective in itself. It did, however, lead them to regard politics as a conversation that required the presence of other voices. Indeed they might have agreed with Oakeshott (1962, p. 396) when he stated his preference for 'slow, small changes which have behind them a voluntary consensus of opinion'.

The above survey has demonstrated that Middle Way Conservatives and their revisionist opponents shared some common assumptions about human reason. Both were suspicious of the notion that particular political arrangements could be universally valuable, and both shared a concomitant enthusiasm for evolutionary, rather than radical, forms of change. It is also possible to detect a basic convergence on the means of determining appropriate conduct. Rather than measuring practices against abstract conceptions of an alternative order, they began their enquiries by observing existing social conditions. In turn, they tended to assume that those

individuals who possessed an empirically-informed understanding of social problems were best placed to inform political conduct (Kavanagh and Morris, 1989, p. 6).¹⁷

Reason and Society

Political ideologies are concerned, above all else, with justifying or changing the social and political arrangements of a political community (Freedon, 2003). In order to understand their character, it is thus necessary to determine their adherents' understandings of the social environment that they inhabit. Not only do such understandings mediate their attitudes towards the desirability and pace of change, but they will also shape their views regarding the capacity of rational argument to achieve such change. What follows is a comparative analysis of the assumptions and beliefs that informed the way in which Middle Way Conservatives and revisionist social democrats understood post-war British society.

Departing from the reasoning that informed earlier modes of socialist thought, revisionists argued that irrational forces shaped the basic features of the social order. Here, the work of Evan Durbin was particularly significant. In response to the outbreak of the Second World War, Durbin (1942, p. 96) explored the subconscious patterns of thought that shaped individuals' behaviour. His principal conclusion was that feelings that were repressed within the individual often found a social outlet. 'From the secret places of the heart,' he wrote, 'there floods up into political and social affairs the torrents of irrational feeling, both positive and negative, which make the relations of social groups unstable and uncontrollable'.¹⁸ Two decades later, revisionists reproduced similar propositions. Magee (1962, p. 18), for instance, noted that '[t]he important truth which irrationalists have grasped is that the objects of human activity are not determined by reason but by our physical and emotional needs'. This sensitivity to the irrationality of human behaviour did not lead revisionists to eschew rational politics, but it did lead them to restrict its function. The task of rational thought, they argued, was to

determine the appropriate means to realising ends that were often shaped by basic needs and wants that were external to reason (Magee, 1962, p. 19).

As well as being suspicious of the notion that the social order was comprised of rational actors, revisionists were also reluctant to believe that reasoned argument could repair the irrational and undesirable kinds of thought that they observed (see Ellison, 1994, p. 90 and Nuttall, 2005, pp. 2-3). David Reisman (1997, p. 123) has identified in Anthony Crosland's thought a 'misanthropic acceptance of envious resentment as a fact of life'. Any egalitarian reformist, Crosland argued, had to confront the fact that social envy was 'quite natural'. Plant (1996, pp. 172-73) has alleged that this feature of Crosland's thought was as much a consequence of Crosland's epistemology as it was a product of his understanding of social change. Under the influence of A. J. Ayer, Crosland, he argues, believed that because it was not possible to provide philosophical justifications for our value commitments, it was necessary to regard individual's value preferences as being largely immutable.¹⁹ Accordingly, he was enthusiastic about forms of political activity that could achieve egalitarian outcomes without requiring a significant shift in social attitudes. In his post-war book, Douglas Jay (1960, p. 347) also described undesirable social attitudes as being permanent features of the social order that could not be dissolved through rational argument. He devoted particular attention to snobbery, which he described as a 'disease of the spirit' that was external to politics. Following the logic of his argument, he then stated that the reformer should concentrate attention on injustices that were capable of social cure through legislative activity.

For revisionists, these features of the social order had important political implications. Not only did they expose the absurdity of utopian aspirations, but they also necessitated an approach to reform that began with observable realities. For Magee (1962, p. 141) this meant, 'taking on responsibility for society *as it is* and starting from there'. To begin the task of political reform by establishing an 'imagined society' that was desirable was, he argued, to

ignore the constraints that the present imposed upon the future. Magee was not alone in making such observations. A decade earlier, Austen Albu (1952, p. 141) offered a similar view in a discussion of Labour's economic policy:

The proposals here made arise out of the application of socialist philosophy to an empirical study of existing economic institutions. The functions that a particular institution performs in a complex society are many and varied and not all of them are to be discovered in its overt aims and objectives. It is the hall mark of Utopianism to make legislative changes and to break up existing institutions without due consideration of these functions and of the human relationships on which they depend.

As we have seen, Middle Way Conservatives often described the social order in organicist terms (Seawright, 2010, pp. 33-34). Central to such descriptions was the notion that interdependence, and indeed complexity, was a necessary feature of any developed society. Thus David Clarke (1947, p. 12) wrote that 'society is an organic whole in which the several atoms react in all their movements upon one another and the whole is moved this way and that by the motion of its several parts'. Such notions were not, however, the exclusive property of Conservatives. Indeed when we survey revisionist discourses, we can identify similar formulations. Consider, then, the following statement, which is extracted from the first edition of Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956, p. 314):

The fact is that a society like ours is an organic unity ... one so highly organised and interdependent between its various parts, resting as it does on a balance of tensions, thrusts, and stresses, that intervention at one point will have effects at

numerous and often unexpected other points. One therefore cannot give it a shock of more than a certain violence without the risk of damage to the entire structure.

For Crosland, then, Britain's social order, by virtue of its complexity, was a vulnerable entity whose responses to reform could not be anticipated. Exposing Crosland's enthusiasm for such a conception of the social order is not, of course, sufficient to demonstrate that he shared the Conservatives' understanding of the forces that shaped its character. Indeed it is possible to imagine Crosland objecting to the conservative notion that the organic social order was necessarily an unequal one because talents and skills were distributed unevenly. Nonetheless, his organicist understanding of society does expose a mistrust of violent change that was replicated within Conservative discourses.

Middle Way Conservatives were also suspicious of the notion that the social order was infinitely receptive to political activity. Two clusters of beliefs informed this feature of their thinking. The first concerned the extra-human forces that shaped the character of the social order. Chief amongst them was a belief in the Christian doctrine of original sin, which asserted that undesirable human qualities were pre-ordained and ineliminable. As Reginald Northam (1939, p. 61) put it, 'Man's goodness ultimately depends on the things of the Spirit'.²⁰ As a corollary, Conservatives rejected the notion that human societies were perfectible. The second cluster of beliefs related to their organicist understandings of the social order. Since the social order's development was the product of forces that were extra-human, it was absurd to suggest that it was infinitely receptive to human reason. As Edward Boyle (1974) put it, 'this is not a plastic world, instantly and easily remade'.

But if Middle Way Conservatives acknowledged the limitations of human rationality, it would be inappropriate to suggest that they did not award reason a positive function. Their enemy was rationalism, not reason, and it is possible to identify some ways in which Middle Way Conservatives diverged from the epistemological pessimism of some of their predecessors. We can take, as an example, Macmillan's embrace of indicative planning in the wake of the economic crises of the 1930s. Speaking in the House of Commons in 1932, Macmillan (HC Debates, 4 November 1931) stated that:

you have somehow to create in the mind of everybody that there is a plan, that there is something to hope for; then they will give their sacrifices, and they will not mind the temporary sacrifices if they believe them to be temporary. If the Government and the House can, as a result of these Debates, reveal to the people that there is a determination to cast aside party definitions, and that none of us will say, "That is a Socialist scheme," or "That is a Tory scheme," but if we will bring an objective and realist view to these problems ... I think we can recreate in the people the faith and the hope upon which they must depend if they are to go through the grave difficulties from which they are now suffering and the terrible disasters that are afflicting many a home.

Two features of this statement are worthy of comment. First, we can note the way in which Macmillan privileges a core conservative commitment, namely the preservation of social harmony, in order to legitimate rational intervention in the operation of the economy. By appealing to a familiar conservative concern, Macmillan was able to justify the employment of a policy instrument that had often been viewed with scepticism by Conservatives. Second, we can note Macmillan's willingness to identify the reasoned search for an 'objective' solution as

an urgent political task. In doing so, Macmillan acknowledged that it was desirable for some degree of consensus to exist between the dominant political traditions and that such a consensus was dependent upon the ability of rational argument to triumph over partisan prejudices.

Not all conservatives were sympathetic to Middle Way Conservatives' attempts to extend the permissible role of human reason. Michael Oakeshott (1948), for instance, complained that the Conservative party was betraying the values of conservatism by embracing the concept of planning. In a review of Hogg's *The Case for Conservatism*, he wrote that the 'rationalist bug' had bitten the Conservatives and suggested that the party should resume its defence of customary arrangements rather than defending innovations on the basis of their potential consequences. It is not necessary here to establish whether Oakeshott's criticism were valid. But his forthright intervention does suggest that while Middle Way Conservatives retained a sceptical reading of human reason, they did award it a function that it had not acquired in older variants of Conservative thinking.

Revisionists and Middle Way Conservatives thus shared some common assumptions about both human reason and its capacity to modify the social order. Both eschewed utopian aspirations to imagine a perfect social order, both appealed to empirical enquiry in their efforts to provide solutions to repair defects within it and both were suspicious of the notion that any particular arrangement was of universal value. This convergence should not encourage the conclusion that social democrats and Conservatives shared an identical understanding of the social environment that they inhabited, for it is clear that the former were less willing to regard the existing arrangements as being desirable and more willing to place particular values at the core of their belief systems. But adherents of both formations acknowledged that the social order was shaped by forces that were resistant to rational argument, and they thus shared a common preference for evolutionary reform.

Reason and Equality

The epistemological beliefs of revisionists and Middle Way Conservatives mediated their broader thinking. Indeed in shaping their understandings of the capacity of political activity to achieve change, they did much to determine their engagements with particular political concepts. The final section of the article demonstrates these mediations by exploring their respective engagements with the concept of equality.

The selection of this concept is deliberate. For in their efforts to draw a distinction between the respective ideologies of the Labour and Conservative parties, critics of the consensus thesis (Jones, 1996; Marlow, 1996) have often cast their gaze upon it. While Labour's social democrats were egalitarians, their conservative opponents, it is argued, were committed to defending disparities of wealth and status. At one level, a survey of the respective discourses of the parties invites such a description. After all, Labour's revisionists declared that their principal objective was to construct a more egalitarian order, while Conservatives often sought to legitimate certain inequalities of wealth and status. And when they approached distributive questions, they began from different starting-points. For the social democrat, the enquiry began with the following question: 'what are the factors justifying differentials?' (Jackson, 2005, p. 169). In other words, they began from the assumption that a particular form of inequality was illegitimate until it was demonstrated that it generated just consequences. Middle Way Conservatives, by contrast, posed an alternative question. 'What distribution of wealth and status,' they asked, 'is most conducive to the organic development of the social order?' And because they believed that some inequalities were natural and immutable, they tended to assume that certain forms of equality were inimical to organic change. But when they were answering these questions, social democrats and Middle Way Conservatives often drew upon similar epistemological beliefs. The below discussion will draw out these commonalities.

First, we can challenge the notion that conservatism is a philosophy of inequality. This argument has been reproduced in a number of discussions of British Conservatism (Dorey, 2011; Hickson, 2005), yet it is informed by a problematic understanding of the status that the concept of inequality possesses within conservative thought. Because they adhere to a limited conception of human reason, conservatives are reluctant to suggest that any particular arrangement is of universal value.²¹ Consequently, while they are suspicious of the egalitarianism of orthodox socialism, they are equally reluctant to regard inequality as a panacea, and they do not regard its defence as being an end in itself. That is why Quintin Hogg (1947, p. 181) could state that ‘Conservatives do not ... necessarily defend the particular distribution of wealth as any given moment, or claim that it is incapable of improvement’. It is thus necessary to acknowledge that for conservatives, a commitment to inequality is an adjacent commitment which can, in certain conditions, be modified or indeed discarded. That is not to deny that conservatives are sceptical of egalitarian propositions. But their commitment to defending inequality is contingent rather than universal (Freedon, 1996, p. 409).

In the post-war period, Conservatives often defended certain kinds of inequality and criticised the egalitarianism of their Labour opponents. But because their empirical observations led them to regard some inequalities as a threat to the harmony of the social order, they did endorse some redistributive practices. In 1942, when the Beveridge Report was being discussed in parliament, Hogg (1944, p. 57), for instance, declared his sympathy with its egalitarian proposals:

The Beveridge scheme is [...] a scheme for the abolition of want by the instrument of a redistribution wealth. There is no burking that fact. That is what it is, and that is what seems to me to constitute its very great value.

Hogg buttressed this argument by suggesting that it was necessary for the whole community to share the burden of the sacrifices that the nation was enduring. Allowing the poorest members of the community to suffer disproportionately would, he argued, do harm to the social ties that bound the nation together. Two decades later, Timothy Raison (1964, p. 25) deployed similar logic. After drawing attention to the emergence of a ‘technocratic’ class, he warned that if status and wealth were disproportionately awarded to those individuals who possessed marketable skills, social tensions would become more pronounced.

It would, of course, be erroneous to suggest that Hogg, Raison and other Middle Way Conservatives adhered to a social democratic defence of equality. For most of these figures, the rationale for egalitarian practices stemmed from concerns about the social consequences of excessive wealth differentials, not a basic commitment to social equality. But their discourses do expose their unwillingness to regard inequality as an objective to be obtained.

In a crucial respect, revisionists’ attitudes to equality differed from those of their Conservative opponents. While the latter tended to regard certain forms of inequality as immutable features of the social order, social democrats were committed to removing disparities of wealth and status. But if revisionists were egalitarians, it must also be noted that they were reluctant to specify a particular egalitarian arrangement that they believed was desirable. Indeed when we attempt to locate a description of the social order that they sought to realise, we are compelled to settle for vague formulations. One example is located within Douglas Jay’s *Socialism in the New Society* (Jay, 1962, p. 8). The socialist’s objective, Jay wrote, was to secure the:

minimum of inequality that is workable if human beings are actively to use their talents; not equal shares, but fair shares; not equality, but social justice.

This formulation was rather imprecise. Not only did it fail to specify what constituted the ‘workable’ exercise of individual talent, but it also implied that an arrangement that might be commensurable with social justice at one moment could be inimical to it at another. To some extent, revisionists’ ambiguity regarding their political objectives followed from their aforementioned commitment to empirical modes of enquiry. Because no particular arrangement could secure the same outcomes indefinitely, it was futile, they argued, to identify a distribution of wealth that was desirable (Ayer, 1956; Reisman, 1996, pp. 188). But it is also possible to argue that revisionists’ reluctance to specify desired objectives was a consequence of their aforementioned concern for social harmony. As Reisman (1997, p. 188) has noted, Crosland was sensitive to ‘balance and equilibrium’ when he considered distributive questions. Although he advocated a significant redistribution of wealth, he also believed that some redistributive measures could provoke the kinds of resentment and envy that social democrats were seeking to contain. He was suspicious, for instance, of the notion that income tax could be an effective egalitarian instrument. In his view, levying higher taxes upon the wealthier members of the community would do little to resolve inequalities of social status (Crosland, 2006, p. 280).

Revisionists were also committed to a democratic conception of equality, whereby the distribution of wealth and status was to be determined by criteria that were socially acceptable. Hugh Gaitskell’s (1956, p. 3) argument that income differentials should be ‘related to generally accepted criteria of merit’, such as the nature of an individual’s work, was characteristic. And since these criteria were perceived by revisionists to be underdetermined by empirical argument, it followed that the egalitarian should attempt to achieve change within the existing climate of opinion (Plant, 1996, pp. 172). As Reisman (1997, p. 112) has noted in his study of Anthony Crosland’s thought, these propositions amounted to a ‘yes-but pragmatism of the middle ground’. In their efforts to reconcile efficiency with equality, revisionists gravitated

towards a relativist position. No particular arrangement could be regarded as a universal panacea to the evils that socialists sought to eradicate or to the problem of securing economic growth. It was thus necessary to continually re-evaluate, on the basis of empirical enquiry, which arrangements were most conducive to egalitarian change that could be rendered compatible with social harmony.

It would be absurd to suggest that Middle Way Conservatives and revisionist social democrats were not in disagreement over the question of wealth distribution. While the latter adopted a ‘strong’ definition of equality that recognised the limitations of equality of opportunity, the former were suspicious of any redistributive reforms that could disturb the organic functioning of the social order. But it must be established that their disputes about distributive questions were contained by their common epistemological assumptions. Neither party believed that a particular distribution of wealth was universally desirable, and they were both reluctant to engage in distributive reform that would disturb the fragile bonds that were conducive to social harmony. Indeed their common enemy – social antagonism – led them to eschew policies that would modify the distribution of wealth in a violent manner. So while it is possible to identify a significant dispute about the appropriate distribution of wealth, it is necessary to establish that this dispute took place within a set of ideational parameters.

Conclusion

The above survey is incomplete. Indeed further research will need to be conducted to explore the full range of the two main parties’ epistemological thought. What it does expose, however, is a significant omission in the dispute about the reality or otherwise of Britain’s post-war consensus. It has demonstrated that when we explore the epistemologies that informed the main parties’ thought and behaviour in the post-war period, it becomes possible to reconcile some

of the arguments that have been marshalled to both defend and critique Paul Addison's thesis. As critics of this thesis have demonstrated (Kerr, 2001; Hickson, 2004), the Labour and Conservative parties were divided on a series of ideological questions. While the former began from the assumption that equality was desirable, the latter were suspicious of egalitarian activity. And while Labour's leaders were more enthusiastic about policies that were designed to impair the operation of the market, their opponents often sought to protect it from the interference of the state. But because both parties adhered to similar epistemological assumptions and, in turn, similar ideas about appropriate political conduct, their disputes were contained within a set of ideational parameters. Of these assumptions, perhaps the most significant concerned the appropriate function of human reason. Both formations believed that this faculty was limited, and they were thus disposed to 'think about ... principles and objectives in the light of new facts and greater experience' (Boyle, 1974, p. 852). Accordingly, they shared a common suspicion of the notion that politics could serve fixed 'ends', and they both believed that evolutionary change was preferable to radical change. These convergences did not eliminate contestation, for both parties began their rational enquiries from different starting-points and evaluated their empirical evidence against different criteria. They did, however, encourage a constructive approach to political reform that was sensitive to the limitations of rational argument to bring about radical change.

It could be questioned whether this epistemological convergence was a peculiar feature of post-war politics. After all, empiricist traditions of political thinking can be traced to much earlier moments (Anderson, 1968; Harris, 2000, p. 12). But it must be noted that certain post-war phenomena encouraged politicians from both sides of the political spectrum to reassess their approaches to politics. As Neill (2013, p. 55-56) has stated, the apparent success of the welfare state had appeared to render some political controversies redundant. And in the conditions of the Cold War, it was often assumed that rationalist assumptions were

synonymous with totalitarianism. Both revisionist social democracy and middle way Conservatism were formations that responded to these phenomena, and although they reproduced many of the beliefs and values of their predecessors, they also departed from some of the epistemological ideas that had informed pre-war political thought. While revisionists sought to extinguish the traces of utopian Marxism that they detected in the thinking of the Labour left, middle way Conservatives, in their efforts to reconcile conservatism with the Beveridgean welfare state, embraced some strands of positivist reasoning that were incommensurable with some Conservative traditions.

Tracing this epistemological convergence is not sufficient to demonstrate the existence or otherwise of a post-war political consensus. A full response to that controversy requires an investigation into political conduct and policy-making as well as the parties' thinking. What it may suggest, however, is that if such a consensus did exist, we may have been looking for it in the wrong places. Rather than being rooted in common ideological beliefs about the desirable 'ends' of political activity, the consensus may have stemmed from epistemological assumptions and the political propositions that followed from them. For as the above discussion has noted, some political actors were reluctant to specify fixed arrangements that they believed were desirable. Instead, they were concerned, above all else, with what Popper termed 'partial ends', and they devoted just as much attention to the proper conduct of politics as they did to the objectives it was designed to serve.

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Notes

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- ¹ See Kavanagh and Morris (1994, pp. 4-8).
- ² For a summary of this literature, see Fraser (2000).
- ³ For an alternative approach to exploring the post-war consensus, see Toye (2012).
- ⁴ In this article, 'Conservatism' refers to the ideas and beliefs of the British Conservative party, while 'conservatism' denotes the ideological family with which it is associated.
- ⁵ Macmillan first articulated such a strategy in 1927. See (Boothby et. al., 1927).
- ⁶ Also see Jenkins (1952, p. 72)
- ⁷ For a discussion of conservative epistemology, see O'Hara (2011, p. 23-51), and Dorey (2011, pp. 31-40).
- ⁸ Magee had stood as a parliamentary candidate in the 1959 general election.
- ⁹ It is instructive to compare the epistemology of John Strachey with that of Anthony Crosland. See Strachey (1956).
- ¹⁰ It is notable that revisionists often privileged empirical evidence in their efforts to understand social problems. See Anthony Crosland (1958, p. 86-89).
- ¹¹ Also see Jenkins (1972, p. 121).
- ¹² Magee wrote that Popper was the 'biggest direct influence' on his thinking. Magee (1962, p. 15).
- ¹³ There was considerable overlap between Popper and Oakeshott's ideas. See Jacobs and Tregenza (2014).
- ¹⁴ One such programme can be identified in Hogg's *The Case for Conservatism*. In it, Hogg (147, p. 300) advocated 'Social Democracy without socialism'.
- ¹⁵ Also see Heath (1998, p. 576) and Gilmour (1978, p. 173).
- ¹⁶ Patten was making reference to a statement by Oakeshott. See Oakeshott (1962, p. 396)
- ¹⁷ See, for instance, Crosland (2006, pp. 298-299). I owe this point to an anonymous reader.
- ¹⁸ Elsewhere, Durbin wrote that 'We do not know ourselves. We are not the simple creatures of rational purpose that we think we are'. See Durbin (1940, p. 72).
- ¹⁹ For Ayer's views regarding ethical propositions, see A. J. Ayer (1952, pp. 106-110).
- ²⁰ Northam, *Conservatism*, p. 61. Also see Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism*, p. 12.
- ²¹ Francis Pym articulated this argument in succinct terms. 'Nothing absolute,' he wrote, 'is right for every occasion.' Pym (1984, p. 193).

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