

Stories – History – Histories

The Impact of Historical Constructions on the British Labour Party

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While some topics present the researcher with a starkly bare landscape in terms of resources, studying the British Labour party is the opposite. A plethora of data is available for analysis from speeches to manifestos, from minutes of governmental meetings to personal testimonies. Such a mass of information inevitably brings about a certain degree of confusion and frequent contradictions which make providing a consistent definition of the history of the movement extremely delicate.

However, from such diverse material has emerged a fairly homogeneous narrative of past events related to the party and built around recurrent episodes, themes, measures and individuals. These elements are clearly visible in definitions of the movement such as the one provided by a standard reference book such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for instance:

Labour Party: British political party whose historic links with trade unions have led it to promote an active role for the state in the creation of economic prosperity and in the provision of social services. In opposition to the Conservative Party, it has been the major democratic socialist party in Britain since the early 20th century.¹

They appear as well in extracts from interviews with Labour students from the University of Manchester:

What do you find important in what you know of the history of the Labour Party?

Student n°1: I don't know very much about the Labour Party's history but I do think that the traditional link with the unions is very important.

Student n°3: I think that it was the party that introduced the NHS and that the welfare state is very important.

Which Labour leader of the century would you single out? Why?

Student n°1: Attlee as he led the party during the war and developed the Welfare State.

Student n°2: Keir Hardie provided the initial gut feeling and conscience of Labour.²

¹ Labour Party Definition, <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/326949/Labour-Party>, last accessed April 29, 2013.

² Géraldine Castel, *Anonymous Interviews of Labour Students*, University of Manchester, March 2003.

The link to the trade unions and to the working class more generally, the promotion of the role of the state, the influence of socialism, the provision of social services, key figures like Clement Attlee or Keir Hardie, these are some of the major cornerstones on which the history of the party is founded.

Referring to the work of Allan Bullock, one of the biographers of Ernest Bevin, David Marquand, himself both a historian and former Labour MP, highlights the process leading from a profusion of information to the single, relatively uniform, intelligible and transmissible construction that is history.

Like all historians, Bullock had to select and, in selecting, to give order and shape to a disordered, shapeless reality. But he has a sense of reality that many historians lack. He knows that order is retrospective and therefore dangerous; that events do not come in neat, easily opened packages, but in great, messy blobs that spill over into each other.³

Marquand thus outlines a vision of history as a necessarily partial ex post facto creation based on the reorganisation of a choice of items and the notion that turning into a compendium a complex array of facts, perceptions, emotions and depictions, however valuable in some respects, might not be a neutral operation devoid of consequences. The history of the British Labour party seems to validate such a view.

From Stories to History: the Construction of a Villain

The example of Ramsay MacDonald, pioneering chairman of the party and its first Prime Minister is revealing as he was a man described in turn in contemporary accounts as a passionate elocutionist, a cold-blooded Judas, a martyr to the cause of pacifism or a conceited Cabinet leader.

For example, for Egon Wertheimer, whose *Portrait of the Labour Party* was published in 1929:

However little else he may resemble Lenin, this he has in common with the great Russian revolutionary: in the slums of the manufacturing town and in the hovels of the countryside he has become a legendary being, the personification of all that thousands of downtrodden men and women hope and dream and desire. Like Lenin, too, he is the focus of the mute hopes of a whole class.⁴

³ David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma from Lloyd George to Blair*. (Phoenix: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999) 73.

⁴ Egon Wertheimer. *Portrait of the Labour Party*. (London: Putnam's Sons, 1929) 173-177.

Yet in the decades following his expulsion from the party in the 1930s, the image of the traitor progressively supplanted all others and MacDonald became the embodiment of duplicity and deception to generations to come.

From the very first days of the movement accusations of betrayal had been levelled against Labour leaders, MacDonald among them.⁵ Up to the 1930s, such positioning was limited to the margins of the party, to the anti-capitalist Social Democratic Federation or more generally to individuals who found it difficult to accept the confines of parliamentary action. However, it became more widespread and focused on MacDonald more exclusively following his 1931 decision to agree to cuts in public expenditure and primarily in unemployment benefits in an attempt to fight off the financial crisis threatening the country. This in turn led to the resignation of most of his cabinet, to his being persuaded to become the leader of a National government, composed mostly of Liberals and Conservatives and, eventually, to his exclusion from the party.

Evidence suggests that at the time, experienced Labour politicians like Arthur Henderson, despite their disagreement with MacDonald on the issue which had led to their resignation, did not see the break as unmendable. C.P. Duff, MacDonald's private secretary at the time, recalls the following episode from August 1931:

On the Prime Minister's instructions I went to see Mr. Henderson at the Foreign Office this morning. [...] In a general conversation in which I said that we stood at the parting of the ways, Mr Henderson said that we must not take this too seriously. At the time of the war when Mr MacDonald left the Party he (Henderson) had kept it together and it was ready to receive Mr MacDonald back again. He was parting with the P.M. now in no spirit of anger or resentment.⁶

Several historians have since challenged the image of MacDonald as the arch impostor of Labour history. Ross McKibbin for instance, refutes the notion that there was any satisfactory alternative to the measures taken by the National Government led by MacDonald in 1931⁷. MacDonald's most prominent biographers, David Marquand⁸ and Austen Morgan⁹, refused to endorse the theory of his betrayal, as did historians such as

⁵ See for instance Ben Tillet, *Is the Parliamentary Labour Party a Failure?* (London: 20th Century Press, 1908) 13-14.

⁶ C.P Duff Memo, August 25, 1931, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRmacdonald.htm>, last accessed April 11, 2013.

⁷ "The Economic Policy of the Second Labour Government". p. 109. Ross McKibbin. *Past and Present*. n°68. August 1975.

⁸ David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, Richard Cohen Books, 1997).

⁹ Austen Morgan, *J.Ramsay MacDonald* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

Keith Laybourn¹⁰ or C.L. Mowat. For the latter “If the Labour Party condemns MacDonald, it condemns itself for having chosen and retained him as leader”¹¹.

Yet the bitterness generated by the heavy losses suffered by Labour at the General Election of October 1931 left in its wake the enduring image of Ramsay MacDonald as the apostate of the Labour cause. This vision was encouraged by the writings of intellectuals like Harold Laski in his book *The Crisis and the Constitution: 1931 and After* (20-21) published in 1932, or acquaintances like MacNeill Weir, parliamentary secretary to MacDonald from 1924 to 1931, who, a few years after the events, published a scathing attack on his former employer entitled *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald* in which he quoted from “The Lost Leader,” a poem by Robert Browning:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a ribbon to stick in his coat.¹²

Such a portrayal made its way to the contemporary period both inside and outside the party. In the 1960s, Harold Wilson was nicknamed Ramsay MacWilson in the columns of *The Economist* because of his economic priorities of the time. A few years later, Michael Foot took pleasure in reminding his audience of a limerick popular in the 1930s in Labour circles in an article written for a journal called the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*:

We'll hang Ramsay Mac on a sour apple tree,

We'll hang Snowden and Thomas to keep him company,
For that's the place where traitors ought to be.¹³

Despite evidence to the contrary, this enduring interpretation of history was the result of a combination of factors: influent members of the movement who seized the opportunity for venting their pent-up resentment towards the controversial personality of MacDonald, the difficulty of introspection in the troubled context of the years leading to WWII, a reluctance to initiate such a process of self-analysis from the former colleagues and supporters of MacDonald who found in the theory of betrayal a perfect escape from responsibility, as well as the adequation of such a theory with the radical beliefs held by

¹⁰ Keith Laybourn, *The Labour Party 1881-1951* (London, Alan Sutton, 1988).

¹¹ C.L. Mowat, “Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party”, in Asa Briggs and John Saville, *Essays in Labour History, in Memory of G.D.H. Cole* (London: Macmillan, 1960).

¹² Lauchlan MacNeill Weir, *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1936) ix.

¹³ Michael Foot, “Review article of D. Marquand’s *Ramsay MacDonald*”, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 35, (1977) 70.

many in the new generation of activists who gained prominence as the historic leaders of the movement progressively left the stage. For Clement Attlee, in a book published in 1937, “A new generation is growing up in this country which knows little of the conditions in which the Labour Party started”¹⁴.

The situation was ideal for a single relatively homogeneous narrative to replace the miscellaneous amalgam of facts from which it originated. Incompetence and duplicity came to explain the confusion and occasional contradictions which had marked the first decades of the party’s history while along the way, considerations more in keeping with the genuine nature and practices of the movement were discarded.

Among them was the reality of a party in the making whose leaders accepted the limits of an empirical approach based on learning “by failure and experience”¹⁵ in the words of Keir Hardie, and a progression in fits and starts rather than a linear evolution. Among them too was the necessary adaptation of a party under changing circumstances in the three decades from its creation in 1900 to the 1931 episode, a progression from “childhood” to “responsible manhood” described for instance by Hardie in 1910¹⁶. An equally visible transformation was to be found in the man who led the party for most of that period and of whom G.B Shaw stressed the “very remarkable development from the most intractable of frondeurs always in opposition, to the able and adroit Parliamentarian who became the only possible Prime Minister in the Labour Party”¹⁷.

The sometime cacophonous tendency of the Labour discourse in the first decades of existence of the party was also the result of its heterogeneous character for it was the federation of a multiplicity of individuals, interests and temperaments, accommodating men as diverse as MacDonald and Hardie, but also groups such as the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabians, or the various unions, all fulfilling their role within the larger entity of the party: the I.L.P. as the young men in a hurry providing enthusiasm and initiative, the Fabians as their intellectual counterparts with their understanding of the middle class, the unions as a source of financing, a link to the Liberals and to the working class, the S.D.F. as an organ of expression for more radical positions etc. A respect for contrasting views was deliberately maintained and was part of the larger organic perception of society inspired from biological parallels popular at the beginning of the 20th century and which framed MacDonald’s action for his whole career:

¹⁴ Clement Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective*. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1937) 10.

¹⁵ Keir Hardie, *My Confession of Faith in the Labour Alliance* (London: I.L.P., 1910) 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁷ In Godfrey (Lord) Elton, *The Life of James Ramsay MacDonald* (London: Collins Publishers, 1939) 91.

Equality in organic relationships is not an equality of uniformity or similarity, not an equality in possessions, not an equality in ability or in kind of service expected. It is not expressed in the formula: "I am equal to you", but in this, "I have an equal right with you to self-development."¹⁸

This tolerance for dissenting opinions can explain the mystification of some witnesses of the period like the Austrian journalist and diplomat Egon Wertheimer:

At the party congresses Communist speakers were greeted one and all with astonishing warmth, and the delegates listened to their disquisitions with deep interest and greeted the wind-up of the peroration with loud and prolonged applause only to go and vote all their resolutions into a hopeless minority.¹⁹

Hence a distinction is to be drawn between visibility and representativity of the movement as a whole as another reason for the confusion of perceptions relating to the Labour party in that era.

If this internal diversity might have proved baffling to outside observers and might at times have embarrassed or even exasperated those in charge of leading the party to concerted action, it was nonetheless a tremendous asset essential to its very survival. Indeed, deterministic visions of history in the first decades of the twentieth century such as Dangerfield's²⁰, tend to present the eventual demise of the Liberal party and its progressive replacement by Labour as fated and inevitable. Such a vision downplays the number of obstacles the latter had to overcome and the skills needed for leading a movement from non-existence to national power in a couple of decades. For Hardie:

To have taken working class organisations representing 1,500,000 of the pick of the workers and weaned them away from Liberalism and Conservatism and organised them in a party financed and controlled by themselves is a fact which in itself is in the nature of a revolution.²¹

Exploiting that plurality both from an ideological and strategic perspective was therefore key to the progress of the movement as it offered its leaders a variety of tools to be used according to circumstances, audiences and objectives. It was all the more precious as these were frequently of a contrasting nature. In the first decades of its existence, the party had to appeal, to mobilize, to inspire and also to reassure, to combine the long-term dream of the New Jerusalem with the imperatives of government, to seduce not only the working class, if such a unified entity existed, but also the middle class, to use both reason and emotion. All components of the Labour whole played a part in that process.

¹⁸ Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialism and Government* (London: I.L.P., 1909) 157.

¹⁹ Wertheimer, *Ibid*, 29.

²⁰ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England: 1910-1914* (New York: Smith & Haas, 1935).

²¹ Keir Hardie, *Ibid*.1.

However, trying to reconcile such disparate elements through appropriate rhetoric and actions without giving in to schizophrenia or ending up accused of political deviousness was the challenge Labour leaders had to meet throughout that period. They mostly triumphed over the first one; the second, however, was to be more arduous and contributed to feeding the ensuing attacks against MacDonald.

Yet this leader, as complex as the party he came to head for several decades, managed together with his main colleagues to challenge the odds against its survival and eventual success and to make of this composite group the only alternative to the Conservatives. This they achieved in part through a careful and deliberate process of identity building, which brought together the various elements of the movement around a common culture. Originally, and logically in its infancy, religious motives were crucial to this process and articulated around the promise of the New Jerusalem. This appears very clearly in statements like the following; by Hardie:

To me, life is the only sacred thing. Property counts for nothing. Christ died for man. I am trying to work for man. Christ was crucified for standing by the poor, and where He led, I am not ashamed to follow.²²

Or by Philip Snowden in a pamphlet entitled *The Christ that is to be* published in 1905²³. Or again in posters such as one dating from 1923 where the religious parallel is striking.²⁴

But alongside these borrowings from existing traditions, and in particular from the non-conformist background of many party members, a distinct identity was created as individuals, practices etc. gradually achieved symbolic status. Hardie's cloth cap worn as he entered the House of Commons for the first time in 1892 thus came to embody the pride in the rise of a working man to national political responsibility. Hardie himself became an icon of Labour activism in particular after his death in 1915. References to his legacy were common during the conferences of that era. Common values such as solidarity or freedom from oppression were also part of this emerging set of shared references, as was the recurrence of rites such as, for instance, the waving of a red flag at rallies and the singing of the corresponding anthem. David Kertzer emphasizes the importance of them:

One problem that all large-scale organisations face is how to integrate local activity into the higher organisational level. [...] The common rites served not only to make these far-flung individuals feel part of a larger organisation; they also made the public

²² Keir Hardie. *The Red Dragon and the Red Flag*. (London: Labour Pioneer Printing and Publishing, 1912) 15.

²³ Philip Snowden. *The Christ that is to be*. (London: I.L.P, 1905).

²⁴ Tomorrow – When Labour Rules, *The Guardian*, <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/election2001/images/0,,448940,00.html>, last accessed April 10, 2013.

interpret the actions of the different groups of people as part of the same organisation/
the same political group.²⁵

He also writes:

Condensation refers to the way in which individual symbols represent and unify a rich diversity of meanings. At a subconscious, and hence more powerful, level, these various ideas are not only simultaneously elicited but also interact with one another so that they become associated together in the individual's mind.

Where condensation refers to the interaction of these different meanings and their synthesis into a new meaning for an individual, multivocality suggests another aspect, the fact that the same symbol may be understood by different people in different ways.²⁶

The concept of multivocality is particularly relevant in the context of such a composite entity as the Labour party. This kaleidoscopic dimension adds to the confusion mentioned previously as similar references would frequently elicit a variety of interpretations and reactions. And it also accounts for the subsequent reduction of many-faceted items into one dimensional reconstructions in the following decades. Hardie, untainted by the necessary compromises of government because of his early death, was one such figure and remains so:

As the years went by, as total war gave way to twenty years of uneasy peace, to a second world war and then to renewed hopes for social regeneration and world peace after 1945, the image of Hardie as the dedicated, single-minded champion of idealistic socialism in its purest form became enshrined in the collective memory of the British working-class movement. [...]

The simple ideals of the cloth cap and of the creed of fraternity and equality, cherished beneath the chimney stacks, at the pit-head and on the shop floor, lingered on powerfully.

Even in the 1970s, under a very different style of Labour leadership, Hardie provided the essential myth that gave party workers and trade unionists, especially in the older industrial areas in Scotland and South Wales, the mainspring of their faith. For Wil Jon Edwards and many other young socialists in the valleys, Hardie seemed a Joshua, a Moses, even a latter-day Christ.²⁷

The religious rhetoric is revealing and indeed appropriate in describing Hardie's evolution from a politician with his skills and flaws to an icon – i.e a sanctified personage regarded as holy – with Ramsay MacDonald cast in the role of the foil.

²⁵ David Kertzer, *Rituals, Politics and Power* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1988) 21.

²⁶ David Kertzer, *Ibid*, 11.

²⁷ Kenneth O'Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997) 270-287.

Turning Party History into a Canon

The later canonisation of historical figures of the Labour movement is, however, not restricted to Hardie. The traditional representation of Clement Attlee as the legendary architect of post-war reconstruction is another such example. In 2004, he was voted most successful Prime Minister of all time by a panel of academics²⁸. Keith Labourn called “The High Point of Labour” his period as head of government in his book entitled *A Century of Labour*²⁹. Kenneth O’Morgan wrote that it “brought the British Labour movement to the zenith of its achievement as a political instrument of humanitarian reform”³⁰, while Eric Shaw underlined the fact that “of the three post-war Labour administrations, only one evokes within the party a sense of pride and accomplishment: the post-war Attlee government”³¹. In 2008, a poll of Labour MPs organised by *The Guardian* designated Attlee as “Labour’s Greatest Hero” (with Hardie as the audience’s choice on the day when the vote was cast during a public debate organised by the newspaper on the issue)³². Most of the social measures implemented by his administration have themselves become cherished within the movement and outside it. This has been the case of the NHS or of the National Insurance scheme for instance.

Yet Attlee’s years of leadership were anything but consensual as Tony Benn would suggest decades later in his autobiography³³. For Donald Bruce, MP for Portsmouth from 1945 to 1950 and parliamentary secretary to Aneurin Bevan during this time:

These men... these men... They never understood what was happening. [...] Attlee was an efficient administrator. You could say his contribution was to administer efficiently the achievements of our enthusiasm. [...] But if Nye³⁴ had been leader of the party, we would never have lost the *elan* of 1945, never become tired. He would have opened up fresh horizons. Attlee neutered the party, castrated it.³⁵

²⁸ Rating British Prime Ministers, Ipsos-Mori, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/661/Rating-British-Prime-Ministers.aspx>, last accessed April 24, 2013.

²⁹ Keith Labourn, *A Century of Labour: a History of the Labour Party* (Littlehampton: Sutton Publishing, 2001).

³⁰ Kenneth O’Morgan, *Labour in Power: 1945-51* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1984) 502-503.

³¹ Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party since 1945* (Somerset: Blackwell, 1996) 19.

³² “Who is Labour’s Greatest Hero?” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2008/sep/22/labour.labourconference1>, last accessed April 11, 2013

³³ Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries* (London: Arrow Book, 1995) 31.

³⁴ Aneurin (Nye) Bevan was Minister of Health and then Minister of Labour in the Attlee government from 1945 until his resignation in 1951 following the introduction of prescription charges for dental care and glasses, which he viewed as a threat to the free NHS he had strived to build. In the next few years, he came to be seen as the main voice of the Labour left, critical of the policies defended by the leadership of the movement.

³⁵ P.Young & W.Harrington. *Interviews about the 1945 Election*. (Manchester: Labour Party Archives, 1974).

Several attempts at replacing him at the head of the party had been made by major figures such as Herbert Morrison in 1945 or, among others supporters of Stafford Cripps in 1947.

Several historians, O'Morgan and Laybourn among them, have questioned the myth. However, if Attlee doesn't induce the same emotional attachment as Hardie and the same reflexive rejection as MacDonald, he is undoubtedly one of the canonical characters of Labour history, if not for his personality, at least for his political achievements. If a canon can be defined as a list of books regarded as Holy Scripture, Attlee did indeed write a significant number of pages.

This process of polarisation between heroes and villains has not been without consequences. It has made the possibility for comparing their ideas and perspectives akin to heresy and has contributed to concealing a core of shared principles and practices which seems closer to the intrinsic identity of the British Labour movement than the stereotypical vision of its history conveyed since their respective eras of influence. For instance, MacDonald's organic beliefs were analogous to Attlee's, in particular their mutual respect for diversity within the movement. Tellingly, the I.L.P.'s decision to leave the Labour party came in 1932, after the exclusion of MacDonald, while Bevan's resignation in 1951 took place when Attlee was away sick. Attlee's memory of this event is revealing of the proximity of his position to MacDonald's, of their tolerance for differences in styles, methods, sometimes priorities, as long as key values were safeguarded:

It was unfortunate that I was ill just then. It oughtn't to have gone so far, but both sides dug their feet in and took up positions and wouldn't budge. [...] In my view, there was no real difference of principle between Nye and the rest of the Cabinet and I was sorry it was allowed to develop into one.³⁶

Because pragmatic considerations were in constant interaction with them, both men saw these values as guiding lights rather than shackles. Their approach to measures implemented in the past was similar: on the issue of nationalisation for example, Attlee wrote: "Nationalisation was not an end in itself but an essential element in achieving the ends which we sought"³⁷.

An empirical dimension was also obvious in Attlee's outlook on political action³⁸. A continuity with the first decades of the movement regarding its identity also appears clearly

³⁶ Clement Attlee & Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: The War and Post-war Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Earl Attlee* (London: Heinemann, 1961) 246.

³⁷ Clement Attlee. *As it Happened* (London: Heinemann, 1954) 162.

³⁸ Clement Attlee. *Ibid.* 163.

in speeches like this one from 1946 when Attlee chose to quote from a poem by William Blake:

I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.³⁹

Such necessarily brief examples nonetheless tend to challenge the traditional representation of MacDonald and Attlee as two diametrically opposed figures of the party's history beyond superficial dissimilarities in personalities and styles, and genuine disparities of context. Attlee himself had initially sided with the theory of betrayal initiated in the 1930s. However, his comments on his predecessor following his own experience of leadership and government were much more qualified when years later, after leaving office himself, he compared his premiership to that MacDonald's in the first decades of the century⁴⁰.

In both cases, the selective process which has led from a complex arrangement of facts to a single historical narrative, or the conversion of stories into History, has left aside crucial elements pertaining to the nature of the movement in all its diversity and in particular, those which represented the common ground on which both MacDonald and Attlee had built their electoral successes and governmental practices while securing the support of a majority, if not all, of their followers. Unsurprisingly, the replacement of a polymorphous compound by a relatively Manichean reconstruction of history has not been without consequences for the party itself.

This aspect is well illustrated in the example of clause IV of the party's constitution. It set out the goals of the movement in the following terms:

To secure for the workers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.⁴¹

The motion was carried in 1918 while MacDonald was still exiled from his peers because of his decision to oppose WWI. No doubt that had he been in charge, he would have been reluctant to adopt such a clause, wary as he was to avoid "the sanctification of phrases of

³⁹ Clement Attlee, *Purpose and Policy: Selected Speeches* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1947) 110.

⁴⁰ Clement Attlee. *As it Happened*, op.cit.151.

⁴¹ In Keith Laybourn. *Ibid*, 75.

no definite meaning . . . like ‘Socialism in Our Time’ and proposals which were, he said, ‘millstones for mere show round the neck of the Movement’⁴².

However, the seeds of the ideological positions which he had sown together with colleagues such as Snowden or Henderson were present in the document: the necessity to act both for the working and the middle classes (“workers by hand and brain”), the quest for a more balanced society (“equitable distribution”), freedom from the excesses of capitalism (through the “common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange”), fairness in industrial relationships (“full fruits”), or the progress of democratic values (“popular administration”). Significantly, these objectives were not presented as absolute, but with a certain degree of pragmatism: not equality but “the most equitable distribution... that may be possible”, not complete popular administration but “the best obtainable system,” a pragmatic outlook also visible in Hardie’s outlook as early as 1896⁴³. For Richard Tawney, the constitution was to be unequivocally non-sectarian in perspective and very much in keeping with the purpose of multivocality mentioned earlier:

Into the details of the new Constitution I must not enter. Its guiding conception was to broaden the basis of the Party by making a bid for the support of all, whatever their personal economic affiliations, who shared its main conceptions.⁴⁴

However, reactions to the attempt by Hugh Gaitskell to rewrite clause IV at the end of the 1950s suggest that in the intervening decades, it had become another Labour icon, sanctified and as such, sacrosanct, as the use of religious references by opponents of that decision attests. For Tudor Jones:

Gaitskell thus committed a grave error in failing to foresee that Party activists would react with bewilderment and outrage to his plans for revising Clause IV, to his proposal for, in Williams’s words, “taking down the signpost to the promised land”. Biblical language and imagery of this kind in fact pervaded the entire controversy, underlining its mythic implications. Charles Pannell, for example, warned Gaitskell not to tamper with “the Tablets of Stone,” while Attlee tried to dissuade him from interfering with “the 39 Articles.” Wilson opposed Gaitskell’s plans, as he later explained, “on the grounds that to tell the Labour Party member that his political bible has been torn up is like telling a Christadelphian that there is no God.”⁴⁵

Being aware of that iconic dimension enabled Wilson to adopt a completely different strategy when he succeeded Gaitskell at the head of the party, with much more success both from an internal and an electoral perspective. Despite fighting the 1964 General Election on the theme of scientific revolution, Wilson, who had studied history at Oxford

⁴² Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialist Review*, March 1926 IN Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain between the Wars* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1964) 287.

⁴³ Kenneth O’Morgan, *ibid* 207.

⁴⁴ R.H Tawney, *The British Labor Movement*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925) 34.

⁴⁵ Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party From Gaitskell to Blair* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996) 61.

and had expressed his admiration for MacMillan's "deep sense of history"⁴⁶, opted for integrating the heritage of his party into a programme which he wanted geared towards the future, modernising it rather than trying to replace it completely. Rather than sticking to the notion that Clause IV had established nationalisation as one of the ultimate targets to be achieved by the movement as its defenders during the 1959 conflict had done, he preferred to try and reinterpret the concept of common ownership and adapt it to the context of the 1960s⁴⁷. The public-private partnership over the ownership of the British Leyland motor manufacturer set up in 1970 illustrated this position and a similar approach was visible in the 1975 legislation on pensions when Wilson and his team decided to adapt the original system implemented during Attlee's period of government to changing circumstances⁴⁸.

Such initiatives were in part responsible for the severe criticisms he was subjected to despite the closeness of such an approach with that of the pioneers of the movement as defined earlier. Ken Coates for instance, qualified his defeat at the 1970 General Election as "the lot of those whom the gods find guilty of breach of faith"⁴⁹. Yet, just like MacDonald in his time, he managed to secure the support of the majority of the party up to his resignation in 1976 and to see it through several electoral victories. His ability to reconcile an understanding of history with a progressive perspective was crucial in this process as failure to do so was undoubtedly an obstacle his predecessor did not manage to overcome.

In the second half of the 1950s, as once again a partial, monolithic vision of history supplanted the composite reality from which it emerged, the measures implemented by the Attlee government came to be seen as THE reference, singular and unique, THE signpost to the promised land whereas the example of MacDonald, excommunicated for his perceived abandonment of the gospel, illustrated the fate of traitors. The fluid, erratic clashes and tensions of the first decades of the movement were succeeded by rigid rivalries as opposing groups competed to lead the way on the next phase of this journey. The terminology used to refer to these groups is itself emblematic of the rigidification of antagonisms in that period. Indeed, the words "left" and "right" seem to imply a desire to move in different directions, a parting of the ways, with two sections holding mutually exclusive projects for the party significantly related to the Attlee legacy: further for the

⁴⁶ Harold Wilson, *Purpose in Politics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964) 95.

⁴⁷ Harold Wilson, *Final Term, the Labour Government 1974-76* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979) 34.

⁴⁸ Harold Wilson. *Ibid* 126.

⁴⁹ Ken Coates, *The Crisis of British Socialism: Essays on the Rise of Harold Wilson and the Fall of the Labour Party* (London/Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1971) 64.

“Left,” beyond for the “Right”. The notion that several diverging propositions could contribute to a common thread which would serve as a basis for action was cast aside and with it the tolerance for dissent of the pioneers of the movement disappeared. Its purpose became lost to a nostalgic quest for a unity that never was except in the mythical representation of history prevalent in the movement of the time.

The “Left” was the main champion of this mythical heritage but the “Right” ironically validated their claim by failing to see the many similarities between their own positions and those of the preceding Labour leaders. Consequently, they also subscribed to a stereotypical definition of the party’s identity and past practices centred around the aspects mentioned earlier – a focus on the interests of the working class, on state intervention⁵⁰ etc. – rather than exploiting the tradition of the movement in all its diversity to anchor their programme for the future. In the wake of the 1959 General Election, Gaitskell and the “revisionists” therefore tried to rid the party of the cloth cap image which they saw as responsible for the party’s defeat. As Wilson recalled:

The Gaitskell group had come to the conclusion that it was inherited Labour Party policies which had lost us the election. Douglas Jay was the first to erupt. [...] He came out on the eve of our 1959 Conference with an article in which he suggested that we should change the name of the Party (Labour being too plebeian) and drop all consideration of nationalisation.⁵¹

Hence the ensuing conflict over clause IV of the party constitution. In the process, as “Left” and “Right” fought to take charge of the movement, key elements which had contributed to its electoral appeal and internal cohesion were scattered to the four winds. Pragmatism was cut off from the link to the working class and public opinion as a whole, the organic perception of society from the respect for tradition, and ideas from rituals so that the bearers of an ideological framework for the future came to be separated from those who were in the best position to convey it to the members and to the electorate. The desire on the part of the revisionists to move forward unburdened by a complex and sometimes ambiguous legacy allied to the determination of the “Left” to defend an idealised and partial construction of history thereby deprived the party of tools which had served their predecessors well.

Labour History in the 21st Century

The substitution of lasting if inexact perceptions for historical events, figures and measures, is not restricted to the Labour party, but the polymorphous dimension of this

⁵⁰ Cf Douglas Jay, “Are We Downhearted? Yes, but we’ll win back”, *Forward*, October 16, 1959.

⁵¹ Harold Wilson, *The Making of a Prime Minister: 1916-64*, (London: Heidenfeld, Nicolason and Joseph, 1984) 173.

movement makes the adoption of a single interpretation of history extremely tempting, yet problematic, as the example of the 1950s suggests. Neil Kinnock's years of leadership and Tony Blair's from 1994 point to a similar direction. Replacing the red flag as the party logo by a rose, for one, or moving the Labour headquarters to the stylish Millbank Tower, for the other, were just some of the most visible illustrations of a common determination to mark a clear distance with the party's past, which was just as manifest in the policy review initiated following the 1987 defeat or in the Third Way theoretical framework adopted in the following years.

The Conservative rhetoric, from the 1960s and even more so in the 1980s, presented clashes within the party as evidence of the inevitable self-destruction of a movement whose ideological tenets had become irretrievably obsolete. Ironically, both Kinnock and Blair chose not to question that vision, even though such tensions had been inherent to the federal structure of the Labour organisation since its creation, either for lack of a genuine understanding of the party's history or to serve their own strategic objectives and project. Under Kinnock and even more so under Blair, party icons were therefore either bulldozed or put under glass to be admired from afar as relics of a bygone era as Labour morphed into New Labour. The rewriting of clause IV in 1995 was the most symbolic illustration of this phenomenon. The functioning of the party was also altered so as to move away from the disorderly model of the past toward a more disciplined and homogeneous one.

Such an attitude enabled the New Labour team to bypass the stifling yoke of outdated interpretations their immediate predecessors had had to carry. This in turn fed a tremendously efficient communication and organisation geared toward delivery, which resulted in three General Election victories, an unprecedented record for Labour. It was however based on a caricatural vision of the party's history⁵² which, if it helped convey a clear message to the electorate went together with an inaccurate understanding of the party's functioning and core identity which was not devoid of consequences as was the offhand dismissal of the party's symbols.

Among others, the marginalisation of dissenting factions within the movement for example drained the pool of proposals, arguments and positions in which the executive could dip to build the party's project and made it all the more necessary to look for inspiration outside, with intellectuals, communication professionals or polling institutes. This in turn, especially when added to the casual treatment of the party's icons, fed a growing sense of bewilderment, then dispossession among the rank and file. This feeling

⁵² See for instance Tony Blair, *Prime Minister's speech to the CBI Conference*, November 11, 1997 or Tony Blair, "The Third Way: New Politics for a New Century", *Fabian Pamphlet 588*, 1998, 2.

was voiced by Paul Flynn, who was among the first to question the practices of New Labour in 1996⁵³, but also by the MP Peter Kilfoyle⁵⁴, or by Dereck Simpson, the general secretary of Amicus⁵⁵.

A story was therefore created out of history to serve a specific purpose without any real concern for factual accuracy or potential repercussions on the party itself. Failure by Blair and his colleagues to integrate those factors ended up playing against internal cohesion and political results in the long term as the collapse of membership figures from the peak 405,000 of 1997 to 176,000⁵⁶ ten years later testifies. This downward tendency is not restricted to the British Labour movement but Andrew Heywood emphasized the relationship between beliefs and legitimacy⁵⁷ within political structures, and Kertzer highlighted the risks of a strictly rational perspective such as the one adopted by the last two Labour leaders:

Because ritual is usually identified with religion and, since modern Western societies have presumably separated political affairs from religious life, there is an assumption that ritual remains politically significant only in less “advanced” societies. [...] [Yet,] to understand the political process, it is necessary to understand how the symbolic enters into politics, how political actors consciously and unconsciously manipulate symbols, and how this symbolic dimension relates to the material bases of political power. [...] Ritual helps give meaning to our world in part by linking the past to the present and the present to the future. [...] One of the perennial problems people face is coping with the frustrating indeterminacy of the world. [...] The very fixity and timelessness of ritual are reassuring parts of this attempt to tame time and define reality.⁵⁸

The decision to print Clause IV on the back of members’ cards in the wake of Gaitskell’s attack on it in 1959 for instance fulfilled a similar objective: ensuring the transmission of what were seen as the core beliefs of the movement from one generation to the next so as to convey its identity though the safeguarding not only of canonical figures and measures but also of the canon as “the most solemn and unvarying part of the Mass”⁵⁹. The lyrics of the Red Flag song express very plainly this role of icons as emblems of historical coherence and ethical integrity.

Understanding and guarding symbols, traditions and myths is thus not an antiquated practice in the political context and knowledge of history can be a powerful tool in the

⁵³ Paul Flynn, *Independent on Sunday*, July 7, 1996.

⁵⁴ Peter Kilfoyle, “Calculation, Conspiracy and Cant”, *Tribune*, June 22, 2001.

⁵⁵ “Labour Looks ahead to Third Term”, *BBC*, July 22, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3917675.stm, last accessed April 18, 2013.

⁵⁶ Toby Helm, “Party Struggles for Money and Muscle in Fight for Fourth Term”, *The Guardian*, March 17, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/mar/17/labour-party-funding-membership>, last accessed April 19, 2013.

⁵⁷ Andrew Heywood, *Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 199.

⁵⁸ David Kertzer. *Ibid*, 2-3/9-10.

⁵⁹ Canon Definition, Merriam Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/canon>, last accessed July 21, 2013.

hands of a political leader. From the end of the 1990s, a shift in attitude seemed perceptible in New Labour circles, a progressive acknowledgment of this dimension of political action, perhaps also influenced by the belief on Anthony Giddens, the architect of the Third Way, in the continuing relevance in the modern world of the values defended by Blair's predecessors in the first decades of the 20th century⁶⁰. This evolution was yet not enough to convince sceptics such as Roy Hattersley, who firmly condemned Blair for his perceived "apostasy"⁶¹. Again, the religious terminology illustrates how sensitive the party remained in the 21st century to perceived threats to its icons.

The example of the British Labour party from its creation in 1900 to the Blair era thus corroborates the notion that history is not a neutral collection of facts ordered chronologically but an afterward, subjective record of events deemed significant and representative of a period. History is therefore not an absolute, objective emanation spontaneously born of facts but a relative construction based on inevitably biased, abridged and reorganised components. In the context of such a multitudinous entity as the Labour movement, the task logically becomes even more arduous and potentially misleading.

The example of Ramsay MacDonald illustrates the possibility that a partisan, mostly erroneous narrative should, in party history and broader perceptions, have replaced an initially complex pattern of facts, decisions and reactions with serious consequences for the movement in the following decades. From an opposite perspective, the cases of Keir Hardie and Clement Attlee also attest to a progressive reification of flesh-and-blood leaders into legends then abstract symbols contributing to the emergence of a form of Labour folklore centred around key figures, but also iconic measures or documents alongside the composite as ever history of the movement. The ensuing decades confirmed the growing weight on the party's culture and identity of an official canon evolving away from its historical foundations to achieve mythical, quasi-mystical proportions.

Finally, the years of leadership of Hugh Gaitskell, Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair highlighted, on the one hand the role played by this ritualised representation of history and consequently, the risks inherent in ignoring this dimension of the party, but also, on the other, the necessity to separate this representation from the genuine heritage of the movement in all its diversity and intricacy to try and reach an understanding of the party's

⁶⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Politics after Socialism*, LSE Director's Lecture, February 3, 1999.

⁶¹ Roy Hattersley, "I don't Know What's Worse, Blair's Apostasy or his Naivety", *The Guardian*, June 27, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/jun/27/labour.politicalcolumnists1>, last accessed April 16, 2013

history. In 2013, as Tony Blair and his supporters challenge current leader Ed Milliband's action and perspective⁶², the interest of such an approach seems as relevant as ever.

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⁶² Tony Blair, "Labour must Search for Answers and not Merely Aspire to be a Repository for People's Anger", *New Statesman*, April 11, 2013.

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