

Conclusions

The decline and apparent recovery of Labour as an electorally viable Party has now spanned almost a quarter of a century. Labour's decline in electoral terms began in 1974, despite the defeat of Edward Heath's Conservative government and the formation of a minority Labour administration. Three elections later, the Party suffered its worst defeat since 1918, only gaining the support of not much more than a quarter of the electorate.

Now, another three elections after the disaster of 1983, the Labour Party looks set to end the eighteen year electoral hegemony of the Conservative Party. At the time of writing, there are less than two weeks until the 1997 general election, and Labour's substantial lead in the opinion polls appears to be holding steady in an election campaign that is, by British standards, exceedingly long.

This thesis has sought to account for the Labour Party's electoral performance since 1979, when Margaret Thatcher first entered No. 10 Downing Street. In the eighteen years since then, British politics and society have changed in many ways, and so has the Labour Party. In this concluding chapter, the main findings of the study are summarised, and the value of the theoretical framework developed above is considered in the wider context of the structure and agency debate which has taken place in the social sciences in recent decades.

It will be remembered that the analysis of the Labour Party in opposition since 1979 was driven by two theoretically-informed claims made about the nature of party change. The first was that individual and collective actors are both constrained and facilitated by structural factors within, and external to, political parties. Consequently, the relative electoral success of the Labour Party in the last eighteen years can best be understood in terms of the ability of actors to adopt strategies which are best for adapting to, or even transforming, constraining structures whilst taking advantage of facilitating structures. A two-tiered framework was developed in order to separate the internal structural factors which constrain and facilitate the office-seeking Party Leaders from the external structural factors which may constrain or enable the Party *qua* collective agent.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the comparative-historical analysis of the Labour Party since 1979 which emphasise the dialectical nature of the structure and agency linkage. First and foremost, it is apparent that the relative success of the Party since 1979 can indeed be attributed to the ability of relevant actors to overcome structural constraints for office-seeking ends. This is especially apparent within Labour itself: the restoration of Leadership control begun under Neil Kinnock and consolidated under John Smith and Tony Blair manifested itself in a transformation of the internal structures which had hamstrung agents in the 1979-83 period. Thus, whilst the consequences of Michael Foot's inability to unite his Party were reflected in the British

Election Study data which showed that a large portion of respondents considered the Party to be divided, and hence not a credible choice for government, Tony Blair is now able to draw upon the results of the transformation of internal structures to present to the 1997 electorate a tightly disciplined and more united Party, which appears more able to become a responsible government. This resource has become all the more valuable during the election campaign itself, as now the Conservative Party becomes increasingly divided over the issue of European integration. Externally, the Labour Party *qua* agent has also been more successful in recent years (in stark contrast to 1983) at overcoming the constraints imposed by socioeconomic change, so that it now appeals to a wider cross-section of occupational groups and classes.

Second, the last twelve years in particular demonstrate that the ability to negotiate and transform structures are not in themselves guarantees of electoral success. Despite the transformation of organisational, policy-making and identity structures carried out under the Leadership of Neil Kinnock, the Party remained electorally unsuccessful (although more successful relative to 1983) in two general elections. In other words, agency and the ability to negotiate structures are ultimately futile unless the electorate recognises that changes have been made. It is only in the last two or three years that the electorate appears to have recognised the extent to which Labour has changed (reflected in its higher opinion poll ratings), even though the process began many years previously. In this respect, therefore, attention to communications structures is of particular importance.

The third conclusion to be drawn is somewhat related to the second. The history of the Party over the last two decades demonstrates that structural changes, and the ramifications of such changes, are rarely immediate. Rather, they evolve over a longer period of time. The seemingly impending electoral success of Labour in 1997, for example, is not solely the consequences of agency in the last five years, but rather it is the culmination of a longer-term process whereby formerly structural constraints have gradually been reconstituted so that they become enabling.

The analysis also highlights the extent to which structures, both within and outside of the Party, are highly interconnected. Thus, success in transforming one set of structures often begets the transformation of another set of structures. For example, it is clear that within the Labour Party the transformation of organisational structures was crucial to changing policy-making and identity structures. Therefore, during this period there has been constant interaction between structures and agents, with -- as Giddens' *duality of structure* suggests -- structures themselves being the medium of structural change. The analysis also highlights, however, that some structures are less malleable than others, making their reconstitution more difficult. This is particularly the case with external structures, so that negotiating existing structures may be possible whilst reconstituting them is not.

In summary, the dialectical structure and agency framework employed in this study is able to interpret Labour's electoral performance since 1979 by identifying structural factors which both

constrain and facilitate agents in their pursuit of power, and by assessing how different agents have negotiated and/or taken advantage of structural factors over time. It highlights the long-term nature of party and electoral change, demonstrates that complex interrelationships exist both between structures and agents, and also different structures themselves. Finally, it also recognises that one needs to look at both the internal and external structural dynamics of political parties in order to understand more fully their electoral performance.

In Chapter One it was suggested that a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency represented a considerable advance on traditional approaches that regarded the relationship as being a dualism. Chapters Two through Four employed the dialectical framework informed by Giddens' structuration theory, but in order to emphasise the extent to which such an approach represents an advance on dualistic approaches, it is perhaps worthwhile to consider briefly, using the case of the Labour Party since 1979, why traditional structuralist and voluntarist approaches are inadequate when attempting to understand and explain political behaviour.

A structuralist interpretation of Labour's electoral performance over the last two decades might take two forms. The first interpretation might point to the changing nature of the international capitalist economy: Britain and other advanced economies are moving into what may be called a 'post-industrial' phase, which is reflected in the decline of heavy industry and traditional modes of production associated with Fordism, and the growth of the white-collar skilled service sector centred on information technology and international financial markets. The natural result of this phenomenon is the declining size of the industrial working class, and thus, in a British political system which has for many years been dominated by class, Labour's natural electorate. In this context, Labour's four consecutive electoral defeats and its failure to gain more than forty per cent of the vote in six elections appear to be easily accounted for. As long as the working class continues to shrink, Labour is pre-destined to remain in opposition.

This strictly monocausal view of electoral change has a number of flaws, not least of which is that the same argument was advanced following the election of 1959, before Labour went on to win four of the next five elections. Neither does it account for the electoral success of other West European social democratic parties in other post-industrial states. But its main weakness lies in its blind determinism. It singularly fails to account for human agency; instead agents, which include Party Leaders, Parties (collective agents), and indeed voters, have no control over their own destinies, since their behaviour is ultimately pre-ordained by what Wallerstein refers to as the 'capitalist world-economy'. Given that the Labour Party now appears likely to win the 1997 election at a time when the working class now represents less than a third of the British labour force, this argument is now unsustainable.

A second, more sophisticated, structuralist interpretation of the Labour Party's fortunes since 1979 may add another structural dimension in order to suggest conversely that Labour's

transformation and recovery in the last two decades was inevitable. It would again point to the shrinking working class and its impact on Labour's electoral base, but would instead argue that in a (mainly) two-party system the Party is compelled to adopt new strategies to compete effectively for votes. Thus, from a structuralist perspective, Labour's shift to the right was entirely predictable. What has been described in the previous chapters as agency is instead regarded as nothing more than the actions of role-playing *Träger*.

The problem with this line of argument is that it rests on an unrealistic set of ontological assumptions concerning subjectivity. If followed to its logical conclusion, it regards all forms of human activity as being determined by structural forces. Thus, for example, it could similarly be argued that marriage is predictable in society for the sole reason that it contributes to the maintenance of the structure of the nuclear family, which itself is determined by the capitalist economic system. This notion of subjectivity clearly does not allow for any reflexive knowledge on the part of the agent, crediting it with no autonomy whatsoever. Leaving aside the rather problematic normative aspects of such an ontology, it is possible to question its epistemological implications. As an explanatory tool, this structuralist view is unable to account for many aspects of human behaviour. To return to the marriage analogy, whilst it may claim to *predict* the act of marriage, it could not *explain why* person *x* proposed to person *y* and not person *z*, why the couple remained engaged for four years and not three, and so forth. Similarly then, whilst a structuralist may have claimed to have been able to predict the transformation of the Labour Party twenty years ago, he or she could not have been able to explain adequately how the transformation came about, without acknowledging at any point that agents are knowledgeable subjects who make conscious decisions based upon the context in which they find themselves.

Herein lies the problem with a structuralist analysis of the Labour Party in opposition, or other aspects of political behaviour for that matter. It is simply not possible to account adequately for party change without acknowledging that actors are able to be aware of, and react to, structural constraints which impinge upon them. This claim is not the same as denying that the constraints exist: the weakness, discussed below, of voluntarism. It instead recognises that only when a dialectical perspective of the relationship between structures and agents is taken does a more complete picture emerge.

A similarly incomplete interpretation would result from a simple voluntarist interpretation, which would effectively turn the structuralist argument on its head. In denying that structures exert any influence on human agency, it would argue instead that Labour's poor electoral performances can be understood purely in terms of it failing to present vote-maximising policies to an electorate which votes on the basis of calculated analyses of the costs and benefits of alternative outcomes. Realising that this is the case, Party Leaders and the Party *qua* rational agent simply change the nature of the Party to correspond to the preferences of the electorate.

This voluntarist conception of rational agents unfettered by structuralist constraints is flawed in two ways. First, it assumes that agents will always act rationally, and second, it assumes that they are always *free* to act as they so wish. But, as the above analysis demonstrated, Party Leaders are not free to act in this way. They are guided by behavioural norms and conventions which prohibit a purely 'rational' approach to political and collective action. It is naïve, therefore, to assume that actors are not operating in a structured context; if this were the case then the transformation of the Labour Party into its current form would not have taken as long as it did.

Approaching the question from a dialectical perspective, on the other hand, allows us to transcend the mutually opposing views of political behaviour by recognising that both structures and agency have to be considered together, and that it is difficult to conceive of one without the other. By conceptualising structures as being both constraining and enabling, and by recognising that agents are knowledgeable and capable of transforming structures through their own actions, it is possible to provide a more complete interpretation of political events. As such, the analysis of the Labour Party since 1979 presented above is better able to account for the Party's electoral decline and apparent recovery. It shows that agents do not exist *in vacuo*; rather, they are presented with a complex set of interrelated structures which define the scope for agency. But these structures do not *determine* outcomes, and they can themselves be transformed.

In the final analysis, this study has shown how a dialectical understanding of the structure-agency linkage can usefully be employed in the study of political parties and electoral performance. It has demonstrated that the electoral performance of the Labour Party since 1979 can be explained by a comparative understanding of the interaction of individual and collective agents, and the structures which influence their behaviour. The abilities of agents to take advantage of structural resources and transform the nature of structural constraints appear crucial to electoral success.

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory has been widely acknowledged as a major contribution to contemporary social theory, and yet Giddens has been criticised for failing to develop it more fully in the context of empirical social research. It is hoped that the framework developed above on the basis of Giddens' theory demonstrates that his dialectical perspective can be placed in the service of comparative analyses of political parties over time (and although not explored here, space also), in a manner that eschews monocausal explanation and presents a more complete interpretation of the processes which impinge upon their electoral performance.