Chapter One: *A Theoretical Framework for Studying The Labour Party in Opposition*

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci claimed that "to write the history of a party is to write the general history of a country from a monographic point of view" (quoted in Anderson, 1994: 9). There is indeed some truth in his dictum, and in the absence of a guiding framework, an attempt to discuss and interpret the electoral performance of the Labour Party since 1979 could very easily turn into an historical analysis of British politics and society in the last quarter of the twentieth century, running to several hundred pages. Of course, that is not the intention of this thesis, but nevertheless, the Labour Party cannot seriously be examined without reference to the context in which it has existed. Similarly, neither can we understand a party's electoral performances without also considering the internal life of that party. Whilst the primary purpose of the framework below is obviously analytical, offering a way of interpreting strategies adopted by Labour in opposition, it also has heuristic value: by disentangling the different types of factors influencing electoral strategies, it should help to clarify the research.

The framework uses the concepts of structure and agency to identify factors which have influenced the electoral strategies of the Labour Party in recent years. The relationship between structure and agency has been the source of much debate, since social scientists, whether they state it explicitly or not, will start their inquiries with some basic conceptions of how the socio-political world functions. And since this world consists of structures -- some observable (e.g., a political institution), others not (e.g., class) -- and agents (individual or collective), their conceptions of the socio-political world, or ontologies, will depend on how they regard the relationship between the two. Thus, structure and agency involve the most basic conceptual issues in the philosophy of social science; it is for this reason that Walter Carlsnaes has stated that the "agency-structure problem ... has at present evolved into what is often claimed to constitute *the* central problem in social and political theory" (1992: 245).

This chapter does the following things: The main positions in the structure-agency debate are reviewed with literature drawn from the fields of comparative politics and international relations. Traditional approaches tend to concentrate on the import of *either* structures *or* agency, whilst denying the relevance of the other. In contrast, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory envisions both as important and regards the relationship as being dialectical. After discussing Giddens' work in some detail, it is drawn upon to develop a framework in which a number of structural factors relevant to the electoral fortunes of the Labour Party are identified. More specifically, the framework has two tiers: at one level the Party is regarded as an agent operating within the context of, and subject to, larger socioeconomic and political structures, and at another level as a set of structures in its own right, within which agents in the Party have to operate. At each level

the structural factors which are examined in subsequent chapters are identified, discussing both why these particular structures are selected, and how both their effects on agents, and agents' reactions to these structures, can be interpreted.

I. *Traditional Approaches to Structure and Agency*

Until relatively recently, participants in the structure and agency debate were sharply divided into two camps: those who concentrated on the role of structures in social science, and those who instead concentrated on the role of agency (individual or collective). These positions reflected different ontological assumptions about society and politics, different methodological approaches to explaining social and political phenomena, and consequently different conceptions of how social science should 'be done'. This section outlines and critiques the competing approaches, drawing upon illustrations from several of the sub-fields of political science. For the purposes of continuity, particular attention is given to examples from comparative studies of democratisation.

Structure-oriented Accounts

For many years structuralism held almost paradigmatic status within social science. In social theory this was largely due to the influential work of the sociologist Talcott Parsons. Parsons believed that the relationship between agency and structure (or the individual and society, in the context of his theory) was one in which the agent acted as a 'role-player' who, through the process of socialisation, internalised the norms of behaviour in society (Layder, 1994: 22). Structuralist theories therefore placed great emphasis on the role of structures, whilst agents were merely seen as being guided by structural forces. In Parsons' framework, "people passively assimilate the rules and roles that they have been socialised into and unthinkingly behave in accordance with the established cultural guidelines. People's own reasons, accounts, justifications, and so on, play no part" (Layder, 1994: 22).

One of the most striking examples of structuralism in social and political theory is to be found in 'traditional' Marxism. Marx's concept of historical materialism, which predicted the demise of capitalist class relations, is, according to at least one interpretation, highly determinist. In Marx's teleological framework, the main structures throughout human history were social classes. The individual, on the other hand, was credited with no autonomy, since his or her behaviour would ultimately be determined by his or her social class. This was perhaps most famously expressed in Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he wrote that "Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (1978: 595).

Structuralism has also proved to be extremely influential in both international relations and comparative politics. In international political economy, world systems theorists such as Immanuel

Wallerstein hold a similar view of the relationship between structure and agency as other structuralist Marxists such Louis Althusser (Wendt, 1987: 345). In international political economy the state can be regarded as the agent; but, to Wallerstein:

> The major social institutions of the capitalist world-economy - the states, the classes, the "peoples," and the households - *are all shaped (even created) by the ongoing workings of the world-economy. None of them are primordial,* in the sense of permanent, pre-existing, relatively fixed structures to which the workings of the capitalist world-economy are exogenous. (1984: 60; emphasis added.)

In comparative politics, structuralism has also proved popular when examining behaviour in various political institutions. In cross-national studies of democratisation, the work of Tatu Vanhanen provides an example of a structural approach to explaining the causes of regime changes (Vanhanen, 1990; Vanhanen and Kimber, 1994).

Vanhanen's theory of democratisation is based upon the distribution of power resources throughout society; when no single group can retain its hegemony and suppress its opponents, a transition to democracy will take place (Vanhanen and Kimber, 1994: 63-4). His cross-national quantitative study incorporates data from nearly one hundred and fifty states. The explanatory variables employed to test his hypothesis included 'Percentage of urban population', 'Percentage of non-agricultural population', and 'Number of students per 100,000 inhabitants' (Vanhanen and Kimber, 1994: 67). In other words, socioeconomic structures based on education, occupation and urban/rural cleavages act as determinants of the likelihood of a democratic transition, whilst little attention is given to agency. Similarly, earlier studies (Lipset, 1963; see also Diamond, 1992) which attempted to link economic development with democratisation -- so called 'modernisation' theories -- are also structuralist in their orientation, since economic conditions are seen to be the driving force behind democratisation, rather than the actions of individual or collective human agents.

Structuralism has been extensively criticised in recent years, so much so that in the words of Colin Hay, it "[is] now little more than [a term] of abuse within social and political theory" (1995: 139). There are a number of flaws in the structuralist framework which make it inadequate for explaining social and political phenomena, both in a comparative context and more generally. The fundamental weakness of structuralist thought is its overt determinism. Individuals are seen as having little or no influence over their destiny. Agents do not create structures (cf. Wallerstein, *op. cit.*) but are instead helplessly guided by them. To use Marx's framework as an illustration, it is clear that the terminal epoch of communism was regarded as inevitable; when individuals were mentioned, they were often referred to as *Träger* -- literally, "bearers" -- meaning that they "do not appear in the theory except in the form of supports for the connexions implied by the structure, and the forms of their individuality *as determinate effects of the structure*" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 252; emphasis added).

Such an argument appears difficult to sustain. Structuralism overlooks the potential importance of agents in many social and political processes. In comparative studies based on only quantitative data, one may be unable to account for deviant cases: for example, a country that does not meet a model's structural prerequisites for democracy, but *is* a democracy nonetheless. A suitable explanation for this 'anomaly' might be found by looking at the behaviour of the actors involved, since not all actors will behave in the same way under similar circumstances.

Finally, Colin Hay highlights an interesting contradiction inherent in structuralism:

> Put simply, if structuralist thought is indeed correct, and we are all merely passive dupes of the structures we bear, could the structuralist position ever be expressed? How is it that structuralist scholars from their ivory towers could step outside the structures which inevitably constrain and construct the rest of us, in order to describe them? Structuralism thus appears to rely on an extremely patronising and condescending distinction between the 'enlightened' theorist and the masses, which is logically unsustainable. (1995: 195.)

It is clear then, that such a view of structure and agency is unsatisfactory. Whilst it may initially appear appealing, particularly in large-*n* cross-national studies, a structuralist account would be unable to explain anomalous cases. In comparative politics, and in social research more generally therefore, alternative conceptions of the relationship between structure and agency have been sought.

Agency-oriented Accounts

A number of theoretical approaches can be interpreted as being agency-oriented. Regarding the relationship between structure and agency, such approaches eschew the notion that actors are constrained and/or guided in their behaviour by external structures, since "[society] is nothing more than people 'doing things together' as Howard Becker ... has described it, and therefore there is no point in suggesting that external structures play any part in the conduct of social life" (Layder, 1994: 57).

Theories which place the role of agency at the centre of the analysis work from the premise that the social world is constructed and reconstructed through the actions of reflexive actors, i.e., human agency. Such theories, construct "explanations out of the direct intentions, motivations and self-understandings of the actors involved ... using explanatory concepts which lay actors might use themselves to account for their actions" (Hay, 1995: 195). It is perhaps unsurprising that as the popularity of structuralism was on the wane, agency-oriented accounts of social and political behaviour were in the ascendency. The most influential of such accounts was, and still is undoubtedly, rational choice theory. Borrowing from economics, rational choice theory assumes that actors are rational utility maximisers whose decision-making motives are guided only by self-

interest. Subscribing to the notion of methodological individualism, simple rational choice models are concerned only with the behaviour of agents and disregard structural factors (Ward, 1995: 79). In its various forms, rational choice theory has informed studies of voting behaviour, collective action, political economy, international relations, and legislative decision-making, both in case study and comparative approaches.

In the comparative study of democratisation, a more sophisticated variant of rational choice theory, the 'strategic choice model', has been employed to attempt to explain regime change in Latin America. This model asserts that in order to influence the decision making process in situations of political flux, actors attempt to maximise their own interests by shaping the choices available to other actors. Thus, there is an element of strategic planning involved, in which actors can influence outcomes. Unlike structuralist models, "no absolute external determination of political outcomes is incorporated in these models" (Collier and Norden, 1992: 230). The ontological assumptions in structuralist models and strategic choice models clearly differ, since,

> [in] some studies within the structural tradition, one may in fact find tucked away on the final page an expression of hope that deliberate human action may overcome the constraints that the analysis has portrayed. In strategic choice models, by contrast, this voluntaristic option is more nearly the point of departure. (Collier and Norden, 1992: 240.)

Herbert Kitschelt's study, *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (1994), closely resembles the strategic choice model, in reference to left-wing parties in Western Europe. In particular, the idea of the 'spatial theory of party competition', which Kitschelt uses to explain strategies adopted by parties in their attempts to situate themselves along the political spectrum, is derived from rational choice theory. In a more recent article, Perkins (1996) also develops a theory of party formation in Eastern Europe based upon a similar rational choice model.

Rational choice theory has been criticised on several fronts. In the context of the structure and agency debate, the main criticism of the theory is based upon its failure to account for structural factors which may impinge upon the choices available to agents. Admittedly, strategic choice models are more sensitive to this problem -- indeed their principal task appears to be to remedy this weakness found in simple rational choice models. Nevertheless, a more fundamental criticism of rational choice theory, including strategic choice models and the work of Kitschelt, can be aimed at the central assumption of rationality. Rational actors are presumed to carefully consider all the potential choices available to them before making a strategic decision. Not only does this make rather unrealistic assumptions about actors, but -- and this point is reinforced by Eric Shaw (1996a) in a review of Kitschelt's book -- it also boldly assumes that it is possible for the rational choice theorist to identify what *is* the rational choice or decision for an actor to make, based upon all the information available. For this reason Shaw states that "Kitschelt constructs an imposing intellectual edifice upon shaky foundations" (1996a: 422).

Of course, rational choice theory and its variants are not the only theories which place the role of agency at the centre of the framework. In both comparative and historical studies, scholars have tried to explain the strategies adopted by, for example, leading political figures, in terms of their personal character traits. In contrast to studies of democratisation based upon structuralism or modernisation theories, Guiseppe Di Palma's study, *To Craft Democracies*, adopts a "consciously actor-oriented approach" (1990: 12). Rather than being the product of a combination of structural factors, such as the level of economic development, Di Palma argues that democratic transitions are 'crafted' by political actors. In other words, the success of a democratic transition depends upon the decisions taken at crucial stages by relevant political actors. According to Di Palma,

> Political actors in a [regime] transition are not passive tools of history.
> If actors are aware of predicaments endemic to transitions and act in
> their own interests, then they *can* set in motion a process that, even
> under an unpromising start, may close (be it only in a few cases) with
> the adoption of appropriate democratic rules. (1990: 46; original
> emphasis.)

Just as structuralism has been criticised for its determinism and failure to consider the role of actors, agent-oriented accounts have also been criticised for their excessive voluntarism. It seems naïve to assume that actors are entirely unconstrained by social structures since, for example, economic structures can be seen to constrain an actor in his or her decision whether or not to work. When examining the decision-making procedures carried out by actors during political crises such as regime changes, it is unlikely that actors are not going to be influenced by structural forces. Thus, it would appear that at least some attention to structures is required.

In summary, it is clear that neither of the diametrically opposed conceptions of the relationship between structure and agency are completely satisfactory. In the illustrations discussed above, each lack a vital factor in explaining the causes of regime transitions: Vanhanen and the modernisation theorists fail to discuss the crucial role that actors have to play in such transitions, whilst voluntarist accounts such as Di Palma's, which argue that democratisation is a product of actors alone, fail to consider how the actors are constrained by structural factors. The missing factor is only found by looking to the opposing account: structure and agency can only be used satisfactorily as an explanatory framework when the two components are considered together. The following section considers an attempt to reconcile the differences in the structure and agency debate by adopting a dialectical approach, before discussing how such an approach can be used to study the Labour Party.

II. *Structuration Theory*

The above discussion has shown that neither structure nor agency-oriented accounts of social activity have been able to deal satisfactorily with the structure and agency problem, since "[in] both cases the problem is not so much resolved as dissolved, that is, disposed of beneath a

philosophical and methodological platform that is already located in one of the camps" (Thompson, 1989: 56). In order to move beyond the impasse in the structure and agency debate, a number of social theorists have attempted to formulate theories based on a *dialectical* understanding of structure and agency. This section discusses Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, although it also briefly takes account of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism. After outlining Giddens' dialectical conception of structure and agency, a two-tiered framework for the study of the Labour Party is developed based upon the central features of Giddens' theory.

Structuration theory represents an attempt to develop a general theory of social practices that transcends the traditional divisions of structure and agency. In doing so however, Giddens does not reject outright either the structuralist or voluntarist positions, since he recognises that, whilst both traditions have many flaws, each has made "distinctive and valuable contributions to social analysis" (1981: 26). Thus, structuration theory is influenced by several, often opposing traditions.

The most distinctive contribution structuration theory makes to the structure and agency debate has been to suggest replacing the traditional *dualism* of agency and structure, where the two are seen as being wholly distinct, with the concept of the *duality of structure*. In Giddens' own words,

> By the *duality of structure* I mean that social structures are both constituted *by* human agency, and yet at the same time they are the very *medium* of this constitution. (Giddens, 1976: 121; original emphasis.)

In other words, rather than viewing social practices entirely in terms of *either* structures *or* agents, the concept of the duality of structure regards the relationship between the two as being dialectical, so that neither can be understood without reference to the other.

To understand the duality of structure more clearly, it is necessary to discuss the notions of agency and structure as suggested by Giddens, which in certain respects vary considerably from the conventional usage in social theory. Contrary to the structuralist argument, Giddens posits that actors are not merely passive supports for institutions or societies, which "work behind peoples backs" (Craib, 1992: 38). Instead, the "reflexive monitoring of activity" is a daily occurrence (Giddens, 1984: 5), and actors are able to rationalise their actions by maintaining "a continual 'theoretical understanding' of the grounds of their activity" (1984: 5). This is not to say, however, that actors are always able to explain their actions discursively. Drawing upon phenomenology and ethnomethodology, Giddens' notion of agency incorporates the idea of the agent possessing both *discursive* and *practical consciousness.* The former refers to the ability of agents to explicitly and discursively reflect upon their actions, whilst the latter is a level of consciousness which allows agents to understand *what* it is they do, even if they are not able to fully explain *why* they are doing it. It is clear, then, that Giddens' view of agents as being

knowledgeable and reflexive is much closer to the voluntarist, rather than the structuralist position.

In contrast to previous claims made about the nature of agency by many voluntarists, Giddens claims that agency can be the consequence of either intentional or unintentional action, since: "Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (1984: 9). In short, Giddens argues, "Agency refers to doing", whether the 'doing' is intentional or not. Thus, Giddens' understandings of actors and agency differ in many respects from those of both structuralists and voluntarists. His characterisation of actors as being knowledgeable is certainly an advance on the structuralist position, whilst the incorporation of unintentional actions into his notion of agency also appears to present a more complete picture of action than has often been presented in the past.

Similarly, structuration theory's definition of structure differs from traditional ideas of structure within social theory. Rather than defining structures in the conventional way -- as social and political constructs which are 'external' to actors -- Giddens defines 'structures' as *rules and resources*: "the structuring properties allowing the 'binding' of time-space in social systems" (1984: 17). The idea of structure (conventionally understood) closely resembles Giddens' concept of *systems*, which, "as reproduced social practices, do not have 'structures' but rather exhibit 'structural properties' and that structure exists, as time-space presence, *only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents*" (1984: 17; emphasis added). In structuration theory, then, structures cannot exist independently of human agents -- and in some respects they only appear to have a 'virtual' presence within the minds of agents.

In contrast to traditional structuralist thought, in which structures are seen as determinants of human behaviour, structuration theory's structural 'rules and resources' affect agents in a different way. Whilst not denying that aspects of social systems may move "beyond the control of any individual actors", structuration theory also emphasises the positive aspects of rules and resources: "Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling" (Giddens, 1984: 25).

Giddens' contribution to the structure and agency debate has been considerable; by regarding the relationship between the two concepts as being dialectical, it has been claimed that he has finally resolved the structure and agency problem. Not surprisingly then, structuration theory has influenced many disciplines from sociology to international relations theory (see e.g., Wendt, 1987; Dessler, 1989). One might argue, however, that Giddens has not transcended the divide at all; rather, by redefining structure (as 'rules and resources') he has shifted the central ground of the debate, so that he claims to transcend a divide which has never previously been discussed in social theory. Taking this argument a stage further, Hay (1995) claims that Giddens has merely replaced the dualism of structure and agency with a dualism of *systems* and agency, which

essentially has the same connotations. *Prima facie*, this line of critique may appear to have some validity, but this interpretation of Giddens' theory ultimately appears superficial. It does not appear to be that great a conceptual leap from structures to 'structural properties', since it is very difficult to conceptualise a structure *without* considering its properties. Whilst Giddens undoubtedly *has* changed the terms used in the debate, he has only served to reinforce the dialectical nature of the structure and agency linkage, since it is easier to understand the impact which structural factors have on agents after specifying their properties.

A very similar approach to the structure-agency linkage has been proposed by Roy Bhaskar, a philosopher of science (natural and social) whose 'critical realism' is centred around his 'Transformational Model of Social Activity' (TMSA) (Bhaskar, 1989, 1989a). Like Giddens, Bhaskar rejects the polar opposites of voluntarism and structuralism, arguing instead that structure and agency are necessarily *relational* concepts. Against voluntarism, both Giddens and Bhaskar argue that structures act as forms of enablement and constraint, which, rather than determining agency, "merely define the potential range of outcomes and strategies" available to actors (Hay, 1995: 201). Against structuralism, on the other hand, they argue that knowledgeable human actors, through an almost imperceptible learning process, are capable of adopting strategies which allow them to overcome (and in some cases, change completely) the constraining elements of structures. However, in one respect, Bhaskar appears to diverge from Giddens, offering a subtle, but relevant critique of one aspect of structuration theory.

As was indicated above, Giddens appears to lean towards voluntarism; the *constitution* and reconstitution of society in structuration theory are based upon the duality of structure. Bhaskar, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the ontological status of structures, and their explanatory role in social and political behaviour. Although he still maintains that the structure-agent linkage is dialectical, he appears to proceed from a more structuralist position: "society [and consequently, social structure] is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency" (1989: 34-5; original emphasis). It is over this question of emphasis that Giddens and Bhaskar appear to disagree. Again, in Bhaskar's words:

> It is because the social structure is a always a *given*, from the
> perspective of intentional human agency, that I prefer to talk of
> reproduction and transformation rather than of structuration as
> Giddens does (although I believe our concepts are very close). For me
> "structuration still retains voluntaristic connotations -- social practice
> is always, so to speak, *restructuration*. (1983: 84; original emphasis.)

Bhaskar's criticism is minor, but nevertheless pertinent, emphasising the fact that agents are embedded in the context of a set of structures which define the scope for actions. However, it is possible to accommodate both arguments, depending on the nature of the structure-agent linkage we are concerned with. It is much easier to foresee the practice of structuration taking place in, for example, a new social or political organisation, where the structures are not so embedded,

than in the global capitalist economic system, where Bhaskar's insight may appear to be more germane. Clearly, not all structures are the same: some, so to speak, are more 'structured' than others. This should become particularly apparent in the discussion below.

The proof that a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency represents a considerable advance on either of the two polarised perspectives must depend ultimately on its usefulness in empirical social research. But Giddens has appeared reluctant to flesh out his ideas as to how structuration theory may be applied in the context of such research, something for which he has often been criticised (see, e.g., Gregson, 1989). He clearly stresses the importance of empirical research, but believes that structuration theory should only provide "a number of guidelines for the overall orientation of social research" (1984: 284). To this extent then, the researcher is allowed a considerable degree of flexibility when incorporating elements of structuration theory. Giddens gives the impression that the theory can (and should) be used in a rather pragmatic fashion, taking elements of the theory which are applicable to the research problem, whilst bracketing off the parts which are not relevant:

> There is, of course, no obligation for anyone doing detailed empirical research, in a given localized setting, to take on board an array of abstract notions that would merely clutter up what could otherwise be described with economy and in ordinary language. The concepts of structuration theory, as with any competing theoretical perspective, should for many research purposes be regarded as sensitizing devices, nothing more. That is to say, they may be useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results. But to suppose that being theoretically informed ... means always operating with a welter of abstract concepts is as mischievous a doctrine as one which suggests that we can get along very well without ever using such concepts at all. (Giddens, 1984: 326-7)

This flexible approach certainly has its advantages, allowing structuration theory to be used, perhaps, in a much wider range of empirical research problems than might be the case with a more rigid theory.

III. *A Framework for a Study of the Labour Party in Opposition*

The discussion above has outlined some of the weaknesses of approaching a social science problem from a perspective which regards the relationship between structure and agency as being a dualism. A study of a political party would appear particularly vulnerable to the weaknesses associated with this type of analysis, since the behaviour of agents such as parties or their leaders will undoubtedly be subject to the contexts in which they operate. Taking a dialectical approach to the structure and agency relationship, in contrast, would appear to be particularly appropriate for the study of a political party. This section constructs a framework for the study of the Labour Party since 1979 which takes such a dialectical perspective. In keeping with the spirit of Giddens'

advice, structuration theory is used to identify structures which affect, and are affected by intentional actors in the context of the Labour Party's electoral strategies since 1979. The purpose in identifying the loci of these structures is to provide a frame of reference in which to situate and interpret the behaviour of agents.

Structure and agency are conceptualised as operating at two levels within this framework. This should not be regarded as being inconsistent with structuration theory; one's definition of a structure or an agent ultimately depend's upon one's vantage point (Hay, 1995: 200). The Labour Party, then, is viewed at one level as consisting of a set of structures which constrain and facilitate the activities of agents connected to the Party, and at another level as a collective agent in its own right, in the context of wider socioeconomic and political structures.

Only three internal and three external structures are concentrated on in this thesis, since it is argued that they are of central importance to the electoral success of the Labour Party. This is not to say that they are the *only* factors which affect electoral outcomes, but it would be difficult to do justice to a treatment of a wider range of structures in a project of this size. Before discussing the reasons for focussing on these structural factors in particular, as well as how the effects of these structural factors on agents (or *vice-versa*) can be estimated, it is necessary to discuss briefly a central assumption of this research, relating to the goals of the Labour Party and its leaders when contesting elections.

This study starts from the premise that the central goal of the Labour Party when contesting an election is, first and foremost, to win the election. At the constituency or local level, of course, this is not always a realistic assumption, e.g., when the election is taking place in a 'safe' Conservative seat in the south-east of England. In such cases the goal then becomes to gain the largest share of the vote possible. At the national level the assumption is not as problematic, although in reality there may also be occasions when winning the election is not a realistic assumption. Since the demise of the Liberal Party as a major electoral force after the First World War, and especially since 1945, the Labour Party could no longer be regarded as a party which had the sole purpose of representing the interests of trade unions in Parliament. Moreover, as one of the two largest parties operating in the context of an electoral system which strongly favours the two largest parties, its ambitions clearly extend beyond that of holding the balance of power in a coalition government, as is the case, for example, with the Free Democrats in Germany.[1] Neither is it a party which, as may be found most commonly in one-party regimes, strives to remain

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[1] For a theoretical discussion of the goals of political parties, see Strom (1990). The assumption made here is in accordance with Strom's conclusion that: "parties in competitive two-party systems will be vote seekers par excellence" (1990:588).

'ideologically pure'.[2] In advanced industrial states, Kirchheimer's more pragmatic 'catch-all' party now appears to be the dominant type, and those left-wing electoral parties which attempt to remain ideologically driven (e.g., Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, or, in Scotland, Scottish Militant Labour) have remained, in Britain at least, small and faintly ridiculous.

Internal Structures

i. Party Organisation

> [P]resent-day parties are distinguished far less by their programme or
> the class of their members than by the nature of their organization. A
> party is a community with a structure. Modern parties are
> characterized primarily
> by their anatomy. The protozoa of former periods have been succeeded
> by the twentieth-century party with its complicated and differentiated
> organism. (Duverger, 1964: xv.)

It is difficult to overstate the importance of party organisation as a structure which may constrain or facilitate agents when formulating strategies, electoral or otherwise. The Labour Party's organisational structure is highly formal and complex. It is a truism to say that the Party's organisation affects all aspects of Party life, but particular attention should be paid to decision-making procedures, including those for electing the Party Leader and Deputy-leader, the selection of Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs), and, if necessary, the deselection of sitting MPs. It is also important to recognise and discuss the relationship between the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), which consists of Labour MPs, the National Executive Committee (NEC), the executive 'branch' of the Party consisting of representatives from the PLP, trade unions, and Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs). Labour's relationship with trade unions is also a crucial element of the Party's organisational structure, given that most of the Party's finances come from this source.

But how can one tell if the Party's organisational structure has constrained and/or enabled agents within the Party who are attempting to make Labour electorally successful? Since the agents of primary concern within the Party are its leaders -- those who would form a Labour government in the event of an election victory -- the extent to which these leaders have been able to 'get their

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[2] This will become especially apparent in the discussion below, but for the moment it will suffice to say that even a cursory glance at the policies of the Party since 1900 gives little indication that the Party has attempted to remain ideologically 'pure', something which is reflective of the political culture of pragmatism in Britain more generally. This is not the same, however, as claiming that all Party members, and particularly activists, have been less likely to remain committed to the principles of democratic socialism. Personal observations of Labour activists at the branch level indicated that they were more likely to be to the left of the Party Leadership in broad terms, and this view has also been supported by more extensive academic studies (e.g., Seyd and Whiteley, 1992). For a theoretical discussion of this phenomenon, see Duverger (1964), and May (1973).

own way' within the Party, in terms of managing and disciplining the Party's membership through the Party's rules and Constitution, and attempting to minimise dissent within the Party ranks are examined and compared over time. The Labour Party, like most large parties, has rarely, if ever been truly united; it is, to use an oft-used sobriquet, a 'broad church'. One of the more curious aspects of attending a Labour Party meeting is to hear some members refer to each other as 'comrade', even if it is plainly obvious that they loathe each other's political opinions, and this could be said to apply equally within the Shadow Cabinet.[3] However, if the Party is to appear fit to govern, it is preferred that such divisions are not publicly aired, and so it sometimes becomes necessary for the Leadership to attempt to minimise or even suppress dissent within the Party.[4] There are a number of ways of judging the extent to which these structural factors have constrained leaders, and also the success (or lack thereof) which these agents have had in dealing with, or transforming the nature of these constraints. First, changes to the Labour Party rules and Constitution since 1979 can be examined, particularly those which have affected the authority of the Leadership in various aspects of the Labour Party's operation. Second, an examination of decisions taken at the Labour Party's Annual Conferences will give an indication of the extent to which the Leadership has control over the Party (indicated by the number of occasions on which motions proposed by the Leadership were defeated). In addition, it is also possible to examine the Leadership's ability to discipline the Party, particularly its dissenting elements, in order to give the appearance of a tightly controlled party which could be trusted to govern the country effectively.

ii. Policy/Policy-making Structures

The structures relating to party policy and policy-making (a decision-making structure which is to be distinguished from other such structures alluded to above[5]) are crucial to the electoral fortunes of a political party for obvious reasons: it is the policies the party presents to the electorate which to a large extent determine whether the party will be electorally popular or not.

In the United Kingdom, like most western democracies, when an election is called the political parties will publish a document outlining the major policies and proposed pieces of legislation that the party will concentrate on should it form a government after the election. Obviously however, not all of the policies in the electoral manifestos are brand new policies. Some will be long-standing commitments, whilst others may have been adopted more recently.

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[3] Of course, particularly in the era of Blair's 'new' Labour Party, the term 'comrade' has fallen out of favour amongst Party leaders, but it is still used regularly by many Party activists at the local level. When John Smith addressed the Party Conference and a live television audience in 1993 however, he still used the term.

[4] Part of the unpopularity of the current Conservative government is undoubtedly attributable to its highly public schisms over the nature of Britain's future involvement in the European Union.

[5] That is, organisational structures refer to 'rules and resources' which govern the internal life of the Party; policy-making structures are the 'rules and resources' which produce the policies presented to the electorate.

That there are many differences between the policy pledges made in Labour's election manifesto of 1979, *The Labour Way is the Better Way*, and the election manifesto of 1997, *New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better* (1997), is beyond question. What requires further examination and interpretation is not only the ways in which the manifestos themselves are different, but also the procedures and structural factors which determine how Party policies are made in the first place. The relevant sections of the following chapters, therefore, will undertake an analysis of the main themes contained in each general election manifesto from 1979 to 1997. In addition, the policy-making structures themselves will be examined, with particular attention focussed on the extensive Policy Review undertaken during the leadership of Neil Kinnock following the 1987 defeat. In many cases it will be clear that the Labour Leadership has been constrained, to varying degrees, by structural factors which have made it difficult to make policies which it felt would be electorally popular.

iii. Identity Structures

It was mentioned above that the Labour Party has never been purely an ideologically driven party which has dogmatically adhered to a particular doctrine, in the way that the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* was a Marxist party in the years before its apostasy at Bad Godesberg in 1959. However, this is not to suggest that the Labour Party has been bereft of an identity throughout the course of its history. The influence of socialist societies such as the Fabians (it was, after all, the leading Fabian Sidney Webb who drafted the original Labour Party Constitution with Arthur Henderson in 1918) has meant that the Party has clearly been rooted in democratic socialism.[6] However, this has not always meant the same thing to all those who call themselves democratic socialists. It is necessary therefore to examine how identity structures in the Labour Party -- less tangible perhaps than other types of structures, but structures nonetheless -- have constrained Party leaders in various ways, as well as how some leaders have attempted to transform, with success in some cases, the nature of the Labour Party's identity for the purposes of both internal control as well as for electoral ends. The extent to which the Labour Party's identity has been changed since 1979 for electoral purposes can be ascertained by an examination of attempts to change the Party's aims and values as stated in its Constitution, as well as by an examination of the rhetoric used by Party leaders and in Party documents such as election manifestos.

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[6] Unlike many left-wing parties in Western Europe, Marxism has never featured prominently in Labour Party thought, particularly since the SDF split from the Party in 1921. Instead, Labour's socialism in its early years was characterised as being a programme of, in Sidney Webb's words, "inevitable gradualness".

External Structures

So far there has only been a discussion of structural factors internal to the Labour Party which may constrain and/or enable individual agents within it. However, political parties as collective agents are also subject to external constraints which affect their electoral fortunes. The Labour Party is no different in this respect, and so in the second tier of the framework three external structural factors which will have an impact on the Party's electoral strategies are discussed.

i. Political Structures

It almost goes without saying that the political context in which the Labour Party has found itself in the eighties and nineties has acted as both a constraining and an enabling factor. The structure of the British party system has acted in Labour's favour on many occasions over the years -- especially the electoral system -- but the changing nature of the system has also been to Labour's detriment.

The resurgence of a strong third party in the shape of the Social Democratic Party (SDP, which was formed by disaffected right-wingers in the Labour Party) and its 'Alliance' with the Liberals had serious consequences for the Labour Party, even if the SDP ultimately did not fulfil its promise to 'break the mould' of British politics. To a lesser extent, the growing popularity of the secessionist Scottish National Party (SNP) also served to undermine support for Labour in one of its traditional heartlands.

In fairly simple terms one can look at electoral data and electoral studies to measure the impact of these changes to the structure of the British party system on Labour's support, but how the Labour Party reacted to these changes in terms of its electoral strategies can also be examined in the structure and agency context.

In a similar vein, the impact of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as the leader of the Conservative Party and, from 1979-90, the British Prime Minister cannot be ignored. Thatcher's impact on British politics and society arguably was more significant than that of her ideological counterpart in the United States, Ronald Reagan. 'Conviction' politics was introduced to the British political lexicon, ending the collectivist consensus of the previous postwar decades. The extent to which Labour was able to adapt to the new political realities is something that must be addressed in an examination of the Party since 1979.

ii. Socioeconomic Structures

Changes in the socioeconomic and demographic structures in Britain have taken several forms which impinge upon electoral strategies. There has been much, often heated, debate between psephologists over the changing role of class structures in British electoral behaviour. In 1967,

Peter Pulzer made the oft quoted observation that "Class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail" (1972:102), but it is less clear if this is still the case thirty years later. Whatever truth there is in the claims of Särlvik and Crewe (1983) that the British electorate has undergone a phase of 'class dealignment' -- a view sharply opposed by Heath *et al.* (1985) -- what is less open to debate is the fact that the working class has been in numerical decline. The impact of this trend on the Labour Party, which traditionally has relied on the working class for the bulk of its support, obviously requires examination in terms of how Labour has responded to this decline.

Socioeconomic structures have also been affected by the Thatcherite policies of the Conservative governments of the eighties, and, as voters' socioeconomic positions changed, so did their values and their perceptions of how a future Labour government may or may not benefit them. Clearly this represented, and remains an important barrier to the Labour Party's future electoral success. The principal resource used when examining the relationship between socioeconomic change and voting behaviour will be data from the British Election Studies carried out at each of the general elections from 1979 to 1992, and the literature associated with them (Särlvik and Crewe, 1983; Heath *et al.*, 1985, 1991; Heath *et al.*, eds., 1994).

Finally, Labour has also had to come to terms with the growth of private enterprise and the decline of public ownership, as well as the growing problem of managing the welfare state (a problem not limited to Britain). Thus, Labour has had to take account of changes to economic structures when attempting to remain relevant in the new economic context. The extent to which it has been successful in this regard will be considered in the following chapters.

iii. Media and Communications Structures

The final external structure to be considered in this study concerns the role of the media and its effect on Labour's electoral strategies. In the United Kingdom political communications regulations are very strict in certain respects, but remarkably loose in others. In contrast to the United States where candidates and parties can buy advertising time on the local and national airwaves, political broadcasts on television in Britain are allocated on the basis of the size of the parties. Limits are also placed on the amount of money that can be spent by a candidate in a local constituency, with strict laws requiring that all monies spent are itemised and declared by the candidate's election agent.

Nonetheless, there are less restrictions on non-broadcast political advertising at the national level, and so parties are able to advertise on billboards and in newspapers. These advertisements allow the parties to draw attention to their policies, or more usually, the deficiencies of their opponents' policies.

The style and substance both of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and national advertising has changed remarkably in recent years. In contrast to older PEBs, in which a leading party figure would usually sit behind a desk and speak about his (the figure was invariably male) party's plans for government, modern PEBs have become more sophisticated, even being produced by Academy Award-winning film directors. National political advertising has also been revolutionised, so much so that the advertising agency which has orchestrated the Conservative Party's highly successful campaigns since 1979, Saatchi & Saatchi, has become a household name in Britain.[7]

It is not surprising then that the major parties now invest much time and money on political communications and image-building. One feature of this trend -- often referred to as a sign of the 'Americanisation' of British politics -- is the rise of the now ubiquitous 'spin doctors'. The Labour Party's efforts in the area of political communications have greatly increased during its years in opposition, and they are seen by many as being crucial to the Party's electoral strategy. However, the structures related to political advertising, as will be shown below, are not always facilitating: campaign's can backfire, and they may not have the desired effect upon the electorate, or even the Party's own members.

A further constraint which affects Labour's electoral chances is the role played in politics by national newspapers. British newspapers are generally placed in two categories, namely the mass-circulation tabloids, and the 'quality' broadsheets. Most newspapers are politically biased, and in the tabloids especially, little effort is made to contain partisanship to the editorial columns. This is a particular problem for the Labour Party since the overwhelming majority of newspapers are pro-Conservative for the most part. Thus it is necessary to examine the effects (if any) of this bias on electoral outcomes, and the efforts made by the Labour Party to counter or transform this factor to its own advantage.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed the main positions which have been taken in the structure and agency debate in the social sciences. Although originating in social theory and sociology, the concepts of structure and agency have been widely used in international relations and political science. It is clear therefore that the importance of this debate cannot be over-estimated.

For many years the participants in the debate have been sharply divided, but in common they believed that the relationship between structure and agency could only be regarded as a dualism. Structuralists placed all the emphasis on the power of structures, creating a determinist model of society and social change. Voluntarists, in contrast, eschewed structural considerations altogether,

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[7] Not coincidentally, one of the founders of the agency, Maurice Saatchi, was rewarded with a Life Peerage in 1996.

naïvely assuming that agents were unfettered by structural constraints. Both of these perspectives were flawed in that they were only able to give an incomplete picture of social or political change.

A dialectical perspective of the relationship between structures and agents attempts to transcend this divide, by arguing that the behaviour of structures or agents can only be understood when placed in a broader context where the other is also examined. From this perspective, structures can be seen as forces of enablement as well as constraint, and actors are regarded as being reflexive and capable of transforming the structures themselves.

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory embraces such a dialectical view, and represents a considerable advance on previous dualist theories. Giddens has been attacked for his reluctance to develop a more concrete programme for social research, but this misses the point of his theory. It suggests a perspective from which we can examine social phenomena, but does not set out to explain *how* this should be done. To borrow a culinary analogy from Craib, "Giddens is saying that structuration theory tells us the ingredients of the meal, not how they have been prepared, how they have been organised on the plate, or in what order or how we should examine them" (1992: 110). In fact, this appears to be an advantage of structuration theory: by only suggesting a set of orienting principles, the researcher is given a greater degree of flexibility when approaching the problem at hand.

Based upon Giddens' dialectical structuration theory, this chapter has set up a framework for examining the Labour Party in opposition since 1979. Conceptualising structure and agency at two levels, it identifies three structures within the Labour Party, and three outside of it which are related to the success or failure of Labour's electoral strategies. It should be clear that the six structures do not exist in isolation from one another; there are complex interactions between structures themselves, in addition to their interactions with individual or collective agency. It is also clear, however, that not all structures have the same properties and this makes some structures more malleable than others.

Having identified these structures, the following chapters will compare over time the extent to which the Labour Party and its leaders have been constrained or facilitated by these structures, and furthermore, to what extent have intentional actors been able to succeed in transforming structures to their own advantage. What will become apparent when one compares the effects of these structural factors over the last eighteen years is that not only have agents' responses to the structures changed, but the structures themselves have also evolved over time. The structures impinging upon the electoral strategies of Tony Blair and the Labour Party in the period leading to the 1997 general election are very different from those that affected Michael Foot's Labour Party in the early part of the eighties. It is this earlier period to which the study shall now turn.