

New Labour, new imperialism ? Blairite foreign policy since 1997.

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The British Labour party has changed almost beyond recognition since the arrival of Anthony Blair as party leader in 1994. Although it can be reasonably argued that the process of accommodation with the new Thatcherite economic and social order (what in New Labour newspeak is called “modernization”) began earlier, during the leadership of Neil Kinnock (1983-1992), a qualitative change was nonetheless inaugurated by the Blairites. From what had often been –or was presented as – a reluctant acceptance of policies that the party leadership argued it could no longer oppose for reasons of electoral credibility (the selling of council houses or the dismantling of the closed shop, for example) the focus shifted after 1994 to an increasingly enthusiastic endorsement of the practices of the “new” Britain that had emerged from neo-liberal shock therapy of the 1980s. Blair himself used approvingly the expression the “British experiment” to designate Thatcherite practice during this period. Thus, deregulation of the labour market, privatization (of everything from prisons to air traffic control, from health care to old-age pensions), the curtailment of trade union rights and employment protection, the abandoning of political control over the setting of interest rates and radical trade liberalization have all become articles of the New Labour faith, defended with equal vigour by all the major actors in the Party.

All this is of course now well-documented and a vast literature exists charting the facts and figures of New Labour’s conversion to a vision of economic and social management which owes much more to von Hayek than to Keir Hardie (or indeed to Tony Crosland), much more to Charles Murray than to Richard Titmuss. A vast literature that the present-day French enthusiasts for the British way would do well to read and ponder over. This might – one lives in hope - lead them to abandon, for example, the myth of New Labour Keynesianism, constructed on the flimsy basis of a recent increase in public spending and employment and presently being peddled by several distinguished commentators of the French Left, or the quaint idea that New Labour is actually much more left-wing in practice than its rhetoric might lead us to believe.

If New Labour domestic policy is now well-documented there has perhaps been less academic scrutiny of the changes that have been enacted in foreign policy since the arrival of Blair at 10 Downing Street in May 1997. And much of the discussion that has taken place has focused on the immediate (and crucial) question of British involvement in the second Gulf War, to the detriment of the wider considerations that I would like to discuss briefly here. A number of polemical works have appeared, but often informed by an analysis of British subservience to US geo-political concerns with which I would like to take issue.

Basically what I intend to argue here can be articulated around the following three points :

1. The New Labour leadership, the two successive Foreign Secretaries (Robin Cook and Jack Straw) and Blair himself have not played a purely subordinate rôle in the revamped special relationship and its present “war on terror”. The facile catch-phrase which sees Blair as “Bush’s poodle” therefore misses much of what is essential in the evolution of British foreign policy since the late nineties.
2. New Labour and its organic intellectuals have developed a new doctrine of armed intervention –an on-going war for values – which has served and will continue to serve to legitimate Anglo-American interventionism. This doctrine of “humanitarian intervention” is particularly important in the process of present and future war coalition-building within Europe, where other more distinctively American arguments of legitimation – the necessity of political “regime change”, for example – have less resonance.

3. The evolution of New Labour's thinking and practice in international relations has been accompanied by a major intellectual and political offensive, generously highlighted within the written and televisual media, in favour of "new" forms of "liberal" or "post-modern" imperialism. This re-emergence of imperialism as a positive trope, providing the key to a series of present-day problems of the international order – "terrorism", failed states, organized international crime, etc., but also economic and social development – is part of a more general attempt to revise (British) imperial history, and invite a more positive attitude towards British colonial practice in the past. The rather clumsy, if preoccupying, French attempt, by a handful of right-wing parliamentarians, to re-orientate school teaching of French imperial history pales in the light of the much more sophisticated work, in both the academic and the political fields, of British historians like Niall Ferguson, to whom I will return.

From the "ethical dimension" to the "just war"

It has been pointed out by most observers of British foreign policy that Blair had neither experience of nor any great interest in foreign policy matters when he arrived in power in 1997. Indeed, during his first year in office he pronounced only one major speech on foreign policy concerns. It could even be argued that the low priority granted to foreign policy was reflected in the appointment of Robin Cook, hardly a Blair enthusiast or a New Labour insider and generally seen as a man of the Left, as Foreign Secretary during Blair's first mandate. There may be some truth in such an analysis, but as we shall see, Cook himself, despite his much later positioning once he had been removed from the Foreign Office, was to be an enthusiastic advocate of New Labour interventionism as presently expounded by Blair. And in any case, Blair very rapidly was to make sure that Downing Street had priority in this, as in so many other domains.

Only a few days after arriving at the Foreign Office in 1997 Cook announced a new era in British international relations in which what he called (and later regretted calling) the "ethical dimension" would be given much greater salience. The United Kingdom was to break with a long tradition, formally expressed in the words of Lord Palmerston a century earlier, in which the defence of British vital interests was seen as the ultimate criterion for foreign policy orientation. Henceforth Britain would defend not only its interests but its values : it would therefore, for instance, turn its back on the wheeling and arms dealing that had been characteristic of the government that had immediately preceded the arrival of New Labour in power, and had done much to tarnish the image of the post-Thatcher Conservative party under the leadership of John Major. Some, outside Britain and within the European Left, were foolish enough to applaud this apparent sea-change in British foreign policy. As it turned out, introducing ethical criteria into the lucrative business of selling arms to dictatorial regimes turned out to be much more complicated than Cook self-evidently had believed. But the rhetoric of ethical values had been activated – with quite unforeseen consequences for Cook and his left-wing supporters in and out of Britain.

Blair, with the active support of his Foreign Secretary, was to resort forcefully to the language of ethical concern in what must be considered as his key programmatic foreign policy speech, given to the Economic Club in Chicago on the 22nd of April 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of NATO. This is a speech to which Blair has constantly returned when asked for justification for his positioning over Iraq, among other issues of international conflict. In his Chicago speech, entitled "The Doctrine of the International Community", Blair seized on the Balkans crisis and the NATO decision to intervene in Kosovo (which he had actively promoted, despite some initial American reluctance) to explain the new line of thinking developed by his government. We find in this speech more than a trace of the influence of two of Blair's closest foreign policy advisers, Professor Lawrence Freedman and professional diplomat, Robert Cooper. The latter is the author of *The Breaking of Nations* (2003) and has no doubt played as important a role in providing intellectual and political legitimacy for New Labour foreign policy as Tony Giddens has done for domestic

policy (although, of course, Giddens has also provided his own apologia for the revamped transatlantic alliance).

The key concept in the Chicago speech is *globalisation* ; for those who are familiar with New Labour theorizing, it will come as no surprise that the globalisation process is conceptualized with the same historical determinism that once characterized Marxist theorizing about the inevitability of socialism. Over the last twenty years, the world has changed “in a more fundamental way” says Blair, “Globalisation has transformed economies and our working practices. But globalisation is not just economic, it is also a political and security phenomenon.” Isolationism, Blair tells his American audience, is no longer an option : “we are all internationalists now. Whether we like it or not”. For the security problems raised by the globalisation process, because of the new inter-connectedness it has generated, will return to haunt those who refuse to take decisive action on them. “We cannot refuse to participate in world markets if we want to prosper. We cannot ignore new political ideas in other countries if we wish to innovate. We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we still want to be secure.”

The Kosovo crisis is therefore situated in this new international context in which “we” – a “we” that is both recurrent and undefined in Blairite discourse on international relations - simply cannot turn away. The questions raised by the NATO intervention in Kosovo were, for Blair, those of the new age of international relations, in which the defence of values that are seen as fundamental (in this case, purportedly, the human rights of the Kosovan population violated by the Serbian government) have priority over all other considerations, including international law. In this sense the Kosovo intervention is, in Blairite thinking, already in 1999 an exemplar for the future : “a *just war*, not based on territorial ambitions but on values”.

Thus, according to Blair, the “most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in the conflicts of others”. Kosovo is therefore just a start in the forceful re-ordering of the world that is now on the Blairite international agenda. In Chicago, Blair stipulated five major preliminary considerations that should be taken into account before resorting to the gunboats. 1. To be sure of one’s case. 2. To have exhausted all other diplomatic solutions. 3. To make sure that the military option is taken “sensibly and prudently”. 4. To be prepared for the long term. 5. To be sure that the national interest is involved. It is surely of significance, as it was pointed out by some timid voices at the time, that the issue of international authorization of military intervention is not alluded to by Blair in this crucial exposition of his vision of the just war.

In his book, *The Breaking of Nations*, which sums up much of the foreign policy advice Robert Cooper had been giving to Blair since the late nineteen nineties Cooper presents the world as divided into three categories of states : the *pre-modern* world of failed states and potential or real anarchy; the *modern* world of states who continue to rely on the balance of power and to be motivated by *raison d’Etat* (the most representative state being here the United States itself) and the *post-modern* world of shared sovereignty and moral consciousness applied to international affairs (for which the EEC is the model). For Cooper, it is the duty of the modern and post-modern world to police the pre-modern states that by their very existence threaten the rest. That policing cannot be achieved without the threat of war : as Cooper points out quite starkly “foreign policy is about war and peace and countries that only do peace are missing half the story – perhaps the most important half”. Britain, as we now know, now does war (again). Indeed, it has done more war over the last eight years of New Labour government than it has for some time in its long and warful history. Five military interventions in all since 1997. Wars that have almost all been in traditional terms illegal, but which are recurrently justified by moral necessity (in the absence of any trace of arms of mass destruction, Blair has constantly re-iterated that the removal of Saddam Hussein, and therefore, the Anglo-American military adventure, was morally justified).

It is perhaps labouring my point to remind you that this intellectual/political framework to justify armed intervention in sovereign states which do not threaten directly the security of those who

intervene was elaborated before George W. Bush arrived in the White House and *a fortiori* before the attacks of the 11th of September. The poodle had spoken, so to speak, in his master's favourite idiom before the master even materialized

Hail the new imperialism

It is of course true that since his first serious foray into the field of foreign policy conceptualization in 1999, Blair has developed and refined his approach to these issues. This has perforce been the case since the 11th of September and Blair's personal decision, no doubt taken in early 2002, to support George W. Bush's war against Saddam Hussein, come what may. Nonetheless, the main architecture of his argument has remained basically unchanged (as can be verified, for example, in his speech on the Iraqi crisis given in his constituency in Sedgefield in March 2004). Blair does however develop one aspect of his foreign policy thinking later in the period : his support for unipolarity. It was in his speech to the US Congress in July 2003 on receiving the congressional gold medal that Blair most clearly expressed his analysis of this issue. In a messianic vein, that has become increasingly characteristic of Blair's public pronouncements on international policy ("I feel a most urgent sense of mission about today's world") he denounces the dangers of multipolarity : "There is no more dangerous theory in international politics than that we need to balance the power of America with other competitive powers; different poles around which nations gather". What is needed, says Blair, is partnership and not competition between the US and Europe (presumably on the Anglo-American model) and he interestingly stresses the role he believes the new member states from Eastern and Central Europe will play in re-inforcing that transatlantic link. It is however Blair's insistence on the the US as a "force for good" that leads me on to the final point I wish to discuss here, the belief, as expressed by Blair that there "has never been a time when the power of America was so necessary and so misunderstood".

This apologia for a unipolar world in which (Anglo-) American power is and should be mobilized for the defence of "our" values has of course led to accusations of imperialism, essentially from those opposed to the Bush-Blair crusade. This particular discussion is however taking place at a time when the dominant representations of the notions of Empire and imperialism have been changing, in particular in the United Kingdom. Just as the neo-liberal intellectuals of Britain some thirty to forty years ago worked unstintingly, and with spectacular success, to undermine the intellectual foundations of Keynesian social democracy, thus preparing the way for Thatcher's shock troops, so in more recent times the same strategy of intellectual subversion is being applied to anti-imperialism. The Empire is once again in the process of becoming "a good thing" and, of course, this work of revising imperial history has self-evident repercussions on the perception of present-day incursions into the "pre-modern" world of Afghanistan or Iraq.

In Britain, the key figure, in the intellectual field, of this rehabilitation of British imperialism has been Niall Ferguson, who has combined academic work and popularization (his first major book on Empire was made into a BBC series) in his comprehensive attempt to rewrite British colonial history. There has since been a spate of books written by professional historians taking up the same or similar themes : this has particularly been the case, for example, in my native Scotland, which has good reason to wish to revisit and redecorate its role in the construction and consolidation of Empire.

Ferguson (himself a Scot) is no naïve Empire loyalist : on the contrary, his work shows a real willingness to explore the dark side of the British imperial adventure, from the extermination of the Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land to British concentration camps for Boers and Blacks during the Boer war. However, his basic thesis is that all the alternatives were worse and that despite the cruelty and barbarity of certain episodes in colonial history, Britain's contribution to the countries it dominated was inestimable. Talking of the Empire, Ferguson claims that "no organisation has done more to impose Western norms of law, order and governance around the world".

No doubt the most interesting part of Ferguson's first book on imperial history, *Empire. How Britain made the modern world*, from the point of view of our discussions here is the conclusion in which he develops parallels with the contemporary situation. Ferguson notes with satisfaction the return of the theme of imperialism in contemporary debate. Drawing on his historical analysis of British imperialism he makes the following general and contemporary conclusion : "(...) what the British Empire proved is that Empire is a form of international government that can work – and not just for the benefit of the ruling power. It sought to globalize not just an economic but a legal and ultimately a political system too". He then goes on to stress the changes in public perceptions of imperial intervention - drawing on a key speech made by Blair to the Labour party conference shortly after the events of September the 11th and an article by Cooper in the British press published shortly afterwards. Of Blair he has the following to say :

"Not since before the Suez Crisis has a British Prime Minister talked with such unreserved enthusiasm about what Britain could do for the rest of the world. Indeed, it is hard to think of a Prime Minister since Gladstone so ready to make what sounds like undiluted altruism the basis of his foreign policy. The striking thing, however, is that with only a little rewriting this could be made to sound an altogether more menacing project. Routine intervention to overthrow governments deemed "bad", economic assistance in return for "good" government and "proper commercial, legal and financial systems"; a mandate to "bring... the values of freedom and democracy to "people round the world". On reflection, this bears more than a passing resemblance to the Victorians' project to export their own 'civilization' to the world".

He then goes on to quote Cooper's call for "a new kind of imperialism, one acceptable to the world of human rights and cosmopolitan values... an imperialism which like all imperialism, aims to bring order and organization but which rests today on the voluntary principle". This is what Cooper himself calls "post-modern imperialism". But Ferguson, the Tory, parts company with his New Labour friends over the issue of who is to take the initiative of the new imperialism. Neither the contemporary Britain which Blair sees as a "beacon" for the 21st century, nor the European Union, whose "post-modern" system of sovereignty sharing is praised by Cooper, have the clout to do so. "There is, says Ferguson, "only one power capable of playing an imperial role in the modern world, and that is the United States. Indeed, to some degree it is already playing that role". The problem is that the United States is "an empire... that dare not speak its name. An empire in denial".

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At Robin Cook's funeral in August of this year all two songs were played in the austere St Gile's Cathedral of central Edinburgh : the *Internationale* and that great song of the Scottish anti-imperialist Left, *Freedom come All Ye*. No doubt this choice reflected his family's desire for him to be remembered as the man who stood up against Blair in the run-up to the second Gulf war and resigned on principles he shared with the rest of the Left. It is therefore ironic that it was Cook's espousal of the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention and his claim that the war against the Serbs in Kosovo was morally justified that paved the way for the post-modern imperialism which has since become the unspoken credo of his party's leader.