

Book Review: The Socialist Way: Social Democracy in Contemporary Britain

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*In 2010, the Labour Party suffered its second-worst general election defeat since the 1930s. Since then, the debate over both the legacy of New Labour and the future direction of the party has been widespread, yet so far there has been little input from a democratic socialist viewpoint. The chapters in this book aim to provide new perspectives in the areas of economic, social and foreign policy with a central focus on the defence of the state. **Daniel Sage** encounters some unoriginal essays and arguments, but overall recommends this collection to students of political science and economics.*



The Socialist Way: Social Democracy in Contemporary Britain. Roy Hattersley and Kevin Hickson (eds.). I.B. Tauris. June 2013.

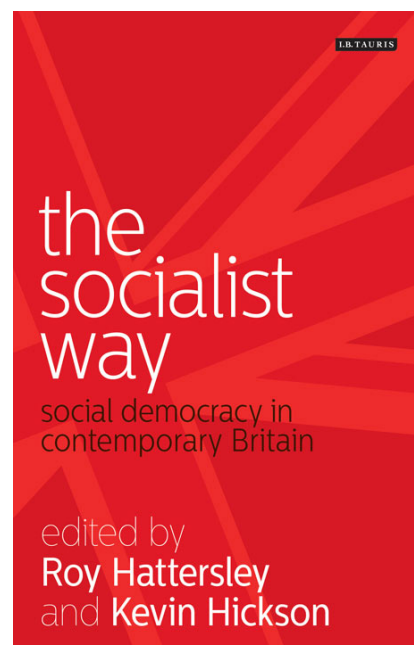
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During a time in which the principles and practices of modern capitalism appeared to be collapsing from within, many people expected that the Left would be best placed to expose and exploit the failings of the present system. Yet within this climate of discredited economic and financial structures, explicit income inequality, and a crisis of living standards, it is largely the Right who have set the terms of debate.

To an extent, this is partly explained by Labour's misfortune of being in power when the crisis began. Yet bad timing surely explains just a part of the story. In reality, the Left has been dealing with its own crisis for many years, long before the advent of the Great Recession. This is a crisis of *ideas*: of how to deal with an economic and intellectual environment crafted by the Right.

The Left's crisis of ideas has only been intensified by the financial crisis: and it is evident across Europe. Where the crisis hit hardest (in Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland) centre-right parties head the government; whilst in Germany and Sweden – countries that possess two of the most important social democratic parties in Europe – the last time the Left saw power was way before the term 'credit crunch' even existed.

So it is of interest – yet with a cynical sense of *déjà vu* – when the latest collection of essays and ideas on the reinvigoration of left-wing thinking is released. One of the most recent additions to this expansive genre is *The Socialist Way*, edited by the Labour Party's old deputy leader, [Roy Hattersley](#), and [Kevin Hickson](#), a politics lecturer at Liverpool University. Split into five sections – the economy, society, the state, internationalism and how to win the social democratic argument – this collection offers a wide range of essays that focus on critiquing the prevailing neoliberal model whilst offering different visions of what a more distinctly centre-left agenda for the Labour Party might look like. The authors are generally drawn from a pool of politicians and academics and there are some interesting – and certainly timely – contributions.



In particular, given current debates about fracking and HS2, Michael Meacher's strongly argued essay on the environment is an eloquent summary of what a green economy might look like. Importantly, Meacher also outlines the challenges that the transition to such an economy will pose. For those who are sympathetic to green arguments, this is uneasy – but still vital – reading.

Further, Helena Kennedy's argument for the failed New Labour approach to law and order, set against the context of the Iraq War, could not come at a more appropriate time as Britain debates the merits of intervention in the Syrian civil war. The legacy of Iraq has had a heavy presence during the summer debates surrounding Syria. And, in particular, Ed Miliband and the Labour Party have shown a desire to learn the lessons of Iraq; or, what Kennedy labels 'the lowest point of the Labour administration's abuse of law'. It is in this context that the further chapters on foreign policy and internationalism – policy areas so often deprioritised to domestic economic and social concerns – assume a much enhanced relevance and importance. Peter Kilfoyle's chapter on an 'ethical foreign policy', for example, lays bare the reasons why David Cameron has struggled so much to win support for Syrian engagement.

However, for this reviewer there are three major problems with *The Socialist Way*. The first is that on the big question – political economy – there is really little that is novel or persuasive on offer. William Keegan, for example, tells us why Keynes was right and Osborne wrong, whilst Stewart Lansley exposes the damaging limitations of our economic model. These are not bad essays, just largely unoriginal. They are arguments that most people are familiar with and which many on the Left agree with.

The second problem is the dismissiveness towards perhaps the most interesting post-crisis school of thought to emerge from the Left: 'Blue Labour'. Unfortunately, many of the volume's contributors fail to see the potential synergy between their own arguments and many of Blue Labour's. Ruth Lister, for example, bemoans the 'anti-egalitarian' credentials of Blue Labour, yet consequently focuses on the damage wrought by inequality and capitalism on solidarity, community and social cohesion. These problems are, essentially, the simultaneous focus of those associated with Blue Labour. The root of this misunderstanding appears to be the bias of many contributors – such as Lister, David Walker and Andrew Vincent – towards the central state and, conversely, a suspicion towards localist forms of social democracy. This is a shame; it is easy to think that the Labour Party would be better served by seeking common ground and avoiding the factionalism that some of the contributors too easily slip into.

Finally, there is often a distinct absence of critical scrutiny towards the brand of social democracy that many of the authors advocate. And, in particular, a lack of diagnosis about why it has been so unsuccessful. This is especially evident in the chapter by Walker, whose title – "In Praise of Centralism"- demonstrates a lack of awareness regarding the failings of the social democratic brand. Many of the chapters, in addition to Walker, advance a social democracy that seems rooted in the past. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with old ideas; rather, what *is* problematic is to misunderstand why such ideas wither, and to fail to apply them afresh to modern problems.

Nevertheless, this is a useful book for students of social science. In particular, students of economics, social policy, international relations and politics will find in this collection articulate and passionately argued essays that typify a particular centre-left response to the financial crisis. In essence, the essays fit into a wider body of post-crisis left-wing writing that symbolises a revival of classic social democracy: Keynesian economics, a strong welfare state and socialist internationalism.

Yet in substantive terms, it remains arguable that rather than reinspiring a confidence that social democracy can respond to present economic and social problems, this collection often achieves the opposite of what it intends. It manages to consolidate more fully than ever the sense that social democrats, at least in the UK, have few strong, new ideas. This is both in the sense of thinking and theorising the economic crisis and, perhaps more importantly, devising new policies to build a more social democratic society.

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