

Tony Blair and the jargon of modernisation

Alan Finlayson

Alan Finlayson scrutinises the contradictions and political implications inside the New Labour rhetoric of modernisation.

Modernisation is not an end in itself. It is for a purpose. Modernisation is not the enemy of justice but its ally.

Tony Blair, Labour Party Annual Conference 1997

The jargon and rhetoric of 'modernisation' abound within the discourse of the current Labour government. It is a rhetoric that is central to the vision, or 'project' of 'New Labour'. But what does it mean?

A number of competing interpretations of the New Labour phenomenon have considered the meaning of 'modernisation' but they do not always focus on it as a term fulfilling a particular rhetorical and ideological function. For example, modernisation has been taken to be: the name of the process whereby the Labour Party adopts a Thatcherite agenda; a continuation, perhaps culmination, of the party reforms first attempted by Gaitskell; simply an empty term hiding the single sin of having nothing to say.

Mike Kenny and Martin Smith argue that interpretations of Blair such as these underestimate both the novelty of his political approach and the complexity of forces, structural and ideological, to which it is a response. Frustratingly, however, while advocating a 'multi-dimensional interpretative

Soundings

framework' that can be sensitive to the discontinuities and contradictions that mark any long-term process of ideological change, they have yet to specify the procedure through which such an analysis may be undertaken or what conclusions it might lead to. They do, though, make the important point that Blair's ideological position represents more than just a capitulation to Thatcherism or the victory of a 'labourist' accommodation with capital. Rather, they argue, it entails the attempt to change 'the party's instincts and values in accordance with this new political economy'.¹

It is my intention here to try and 'get at' what Blair and New Labour represent, in the context of this attempt to change values in line with a perceived new politico-economic reality, by homing in on the term 'modernisation'.

Thinking about the uses of the term modernisation may help expose some of the underlying conceptions of 'Blairism' and the way it conceives of contemporary political change. It is not my intention to unmask a single, true meaning of modernisation or Blairism. Rather, I aim to show that a number of themes converge on this term and that, while some may have perfectly sound implications, it is also possible that without clear thought, they may become the basis for a continuing capitulation to the Thatcherite legacy. Blair's is a political project in the process of being defined. What that project comes to mean will in part depend on how 'modernisation' is conceived. Michael Rustin argued in a recent issue of *Soundings*:

It is a notable and defining fact about 'New Labour' that for the first time the power of capital and the markets which empower it is regarded as merely a fact of life, a reality to be accommodated to, and not a problem, force to be questioned and resisted. The abstractions of 'globalisation', 'individualisation', even 'informationalism', can be used to reify the real agents and interests which dominate the contemporary world (Editorial, *Soundings* 8).

The extent of such reification is related to the meanings given to the concept of 'modernisation'. It is potentially what this concept both reflects and produces since, as we shall see, it tends to locate such processes of 'globalisation',

1. Mike Kenny and Martin Smith, '(Mis) understanding Blair', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.68, No.3, 1997, p229.

'informationalism' (often simplistically understood and uncritically interpreted) in the exigencies of a social and historical development conceived as given.

We will take the following steps: firstly we will examine some actual uses of the term in Blair's own rhetoric; we will then begin to see that the concept of modernisation carries with it certain connotations that are manifest in the Blair project, particularly a brand of celebratory patriotism; next, we will briefly consider some of the origins of the term 'modernisation'. In so doing it will become clearer that the idea of modernisation contains within it a latent theory of historical development that leads to a philosophy of given cause. This recognition will enable us to focus on the connection between the rhetoric of modernisation and the idea of the nation as the necessary form of abstract community that must follow a route through history. It is around this that Blairite notions of civic responsibility are supposed to cohere. These two implications of the term 'modernisation', a philosophy of given cause and an attachment to nation, profoundly shape and define, sometimes in contradictory fashion, the ideology of Blairism.

Tony Blair's rhetoric of modernisation

The speeches of Tony Blair are a good place to start tracing the logic behind 'modernisation'. It may be argued that since set-piece speeches are constructed moments of rhetoric they can reveal only the surface gloss a politician wishes to display and obscure that which they really think. But it is their status as rhetoric that makes such speeches useful for the present analysis. These set-pieces are precisely about the 'vision' a politician wishes to express, the broad brush picture within which they may encapsulate their intentions. It is this vision on which an appeal is believed to rest and which shapes the kinds of long term policy strategy they construct.

Blair's speeches abound with references to the 'modern' party, his 'modern' vision and the newness of this 'modern' world. The first speech Blair gave to the party conference after being elected Prime Minister was quite clear in terms of this general vision. He wanted Britain to be 'nothing less than the model 21st century nation ... ' the construction of which depends on 'drawing deep into the richness of the British character... old British values but a new British confidence'.² This appeal to the nation is not unique to

2. Tony Blair, Speech to Labour Party Conference, Brighton 1997, pi. Here after LP97. Other conference speeches are referred to as LP95, LP96 etc. All page numbers are from texts issued by the Labour Party's media office at the relevant conference

Soundings

Blair and can be found in the rhetoric of most party leaders be they Labour or Conservative. There are obvious reasons why politicians in a given nation state should base their rhetoric on an appeal to that nation. However, this *is* also a way in which an ideological project can achieve an appearance of legitimacy. Finding itself rooted in the given history', traditions and character of the national people, a political project can present itself as simply operating in conformity with that people. Thatcherism certainly utilised a discourse of nation in this way. Blair gives it a populist twist almost speaking as if the nation is newly freed from a colonial yoke. He speaks of people being 'liberated', of government returned to the people. This people is the bearer of the project: to return to his 1997 conference speech, he spoke of 'a quiet revolution now taking place. Led by the real modernisers - the British people' (LP97,p6).

The depth of this connection between modernisation and nationhood is something to which we shall shortly return. For the moment it is enough to recognise the importance of this stress on the modernising impulse of the British people. To legitimise modernisation as a political project, Blair seeks to locate the impetus for it, not in a cadre of political elites, but in the British people themselves. Thus any potential conservative argument that reform necessarily foists unwarranted change on the nation is trumped in advance by the construction of a story where change, renewal and modernisation are intrinsic to the tradition of the nation. Hence:

From the Magna Carta to the first parliament to the industrial revolution to an empire that covered the world; most of the great inventions of modern times with Britain stamped on them: the telephone; the television; the computer; penicillin; the hovercraft; radar ... change is in the blood and bones of the British - we are by our nature and tradition innovators, adventurers, pioneers (LP97, p7).

In this conference speech Blair's claim was followed by a highly apposite quotation from Milton who was described as 'our great poet of renewal and recovery'. It is a description of England, taken from *Areopagitica*: 'a nation not slow or dull, but of quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy of discourse, not beneath the reach of any point that

human capacity can soar to'.

The lines that follow those quoted by Blair could perhaps be seen as encapsulating his *vision*: 'methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks' (LP97, p7). The *moment* of the Miltonian intervention is particularly interesting in this context. It marked an opening sally in what would become the defining radical struggle of English history - and the *period most* debated by historians interested in the modernisation of Britain. That Blair should, however unconsciously, identify his project with that of one of the most epochal moments in British history is surely instructive. The upheavals and conflicts of seventeenth century England fostered a strengthened sense of particularity and identity and engendered crucial developments in the deployment of national consciousness. In such development the notion of Englishness was always related to a wider political philosophy.

Blair's rhetoric works in a similar way, seeking to arrange itself on the side of the nation, opposing the anti-national interests in the establishment. As he put it in his 1994 conference speech: 'the new establishment is not a meritocracy but a power elite of money-shifters, middlemen and speculators ... people whose self-interest will always come before the national or the public interest' (LP94, p160). In contrast, Blairism will transform the nation or rather assist the nation to transform itself. As Kenny and Smith point out, Blair's attachments to conservative moral traditions (law and order, community, family and so forth) 'fit neatly with his attempt to reclaim an aggressively patriotic version of English nationalism for Labour and his repeated deployment of the "one nation" label' (p221). However Blair doesn't simply move onto the terrain of conservative patriotism. He reshapes that terrain making it appear fit for the 'challenge' of modernisation. Thus the country must draw on its deep character, exploiting the fact that the nation is one with:

proud democratic traditions... of tolerance, innovation and creativity ... an innate sense of fair play... a great history and culture. And when great challenges face us, as they have twice this century, we rise to them. But if we have a fault, it is that unless roused, we tend to let things be. We say 'things could be worse' rather than 'things should be better'. And the Tories encourage this fault; they thrive on our complacency I say it is time we were roused (LP94, p23).

Soundings

The country will be roused for a project of 'national renewal' ready to face the new world and embrace change. This is a battle of national historical significance, a battle for the soul of that nation to return it to its true inheritance, modernised and 'free to excel once more' (LP97, p7).

There is no denying a certain radicalism in this discourse, although its roots in notions of Englishness may be questionable from a wider, British, viewpoint. This radicalism, though, is perhaps blunted by the way modernisation is fitted into a story about British history and the processes required for the continuation of its particular narrative. These processes are partly matters of political economy, but also technology: 'We know what makes a successful creative economy. Educate the people. Manage the country's finances well. Encourage business and enterprise. But each bit requires us to modernise and take the hard choices to do it ... We have been a mercantile power. An industrial power. Now we must be the new power of the information age' (LP97, p8). Indeed, we 'face the challenge of a world with its finger on the fast forward button; where every part of the picture of our life is changing' (LP97, p7).

Modernisation appears to refer to a large scale sense of change, development and transformation, something different to what has come before. It also seems to mean something specific to do with new technology (especially new technology) and information superhighways, a shift in mode of production from steam and electricity to computer technology (post-Fordism in other words), women in the labour force and so forth. But modernisation also covers more generalised trends in government action. In terms of specific policies it seems to refer to the necessary changes required in most areas of state action. We need skills, talents and education 'and every single part of our schools system must be modernised to achieve it' (LP97, p8). Here modernisation refers both to the deployment of new forms of technology and facing up to the demands of such technology. We need smaller class sizes, and expanded nursery education: 'the money will be there but in return hard choices and modernisation' (LP97, p9). These hard choices include taking over failing schools and LEAs and sacking poor teachers. But bear in mind that these hard choices are forced on us by the imperative of modernisation which in turn derives from the inexorable progress of our island story. There is no alternative: The hard choice: stay as we are and decline. Or modernise and win'(LP97, p10).

The NHS, 'the greatest act of modernisation any Labour Government ever did' (LP97, p13), similarly requires adaptation. As with schools there will not simply be more money since 'the NHS itself needs modernisation and hard choices' (LP97, p13). Perhaps the 'clearest' statement of what modernisation entails is this:

I say to the country' in all honesty. You can have the education revolution, the health revolution, the welfare revolution. But it means hard choices. It means us all getting involved. And it means modernisation (LP97, p14).

Modernisation means everything we have to do and we have to do what we do in order to be modernised. The hard choices it entails are encapsulated in an 'enlightened patriotism' that is the shell from which modernisation will emerge. The principles of Labour are the principles of Britain, there must be a 'supreme national effort' which will be 'held together by our values and by the strength of our character', our nature as 'a giving people' (LP97, p19). We will be a beacon to the world if the people 'unite behind our mission to modernise the country' (LP97,p20).

The sensibility and outlook that informs this perspective can be found in all of Blair's conference speeches as party leader. These texts are remarkable for their consistency of vision, employing the same phrases and examples. In 1994 it was 'time to break out of the past and break through with a clear and radical and modern vision for Britain. Today's politics is about the search for security in a changing world.' Here too, the stress was on new technology and the changes it will force on occupational structure and the labour market (LP94, pp11-12).

At the 1995 conference Blair told us about 'a new age to be led by a new generation', the popular culture generation of colour TV, Coronation Street and the Beatles (LP95, p4-5). The problem was that 'we live in a new age but in an old country', hanging on to an antiquated class system that needs to prepare to win the 'knowledge race'. All of this related to promises to bring the information superhighway to every school, library and, eventually home (LP95, p6-7). The modernising of public services via new technology was called for as was constitutional reform to be carried out by the 'patriotic party'(LP95, p17). By 1996 Blair was speaking of 1000 days for 1000 years, declaring this the Age of Achievement', globalisation, education, education and education,

Soundings

all of which again related primarily to new computer technology (LP96, p1). The age of achievement stands against the age of decline, drawing on an intrinsic 'national ethos and spirit' such that Labour will be 'part of the broad movement of human progress'. This movement links Blair's party with, extraordinarily, the Old Testament prophets, Wilberforce, and the Union movement. Carried away with his own version of Miltonian rhetoric, Blair speaks of the nation's intrinsic 'common sense', historic institutions, 1000 years of history and declares that the party is 'not just turning a page in history, but writing a new book. Building the greatness of our nation through the greatness of its people ... let us call our nation to its destiny' (LP96, p14). Thus, plugged into the world wide web, paradise is regained.

We can identify- three main strands to the analysis thus far. Firstly, we can see the wide application of the term modernisation to encompass and define everything that is held to be good and necessary. It refers to everything Blairism stands for and represents nothing less than a projected attempt at national renewal and transformation centring on new technology, global markets and the so-called skills revolution. Whatever it is that the British education system and health service require can be called 'modernisation'. This broad deployment of the term necessarily entails the antagonist against which modernisation can be distinguished, so establishing for it some stability of signification. Hence the concept is defined, in part, by its opposition to a hypothesised anti-modernisation that must be excised from the Labour Party but is also incarnated in the failed Tory Party. The preponderance of a crude dualism between old and new in current political discourse testifies to this process. That which is not 'on-side' or 'on-message' is by definition anti-modernisation and out-dated. In this way 'modernisation' is a key trope for New Labour and Blairite rhetoric anchoring an ideological operation, working to include that which is pre-defined as part of the project and securing that project's unity⁷ by excluding everything opposed to it as part of a history that has been surpassed. To some extent this is a necessary aspect of any major political project. However, in drawing such lines the danger is that of rendering equivalent otherwise diverse opinions and schools of thought. It reduces to a neat and enclosed binary opposition a rich and diverse source of political ideas. And, as we shall see, it also obscures the fact that New Labour is very dependent on some very old left ideas that are modernist, if not modern, and definitely unfashionable.

Secondly we must note the frequent conjunction of modernisation with exhortations structured around a vision of the nation. Modernisation is in accordance with the historic and innate sense of the British people, the logical extension of all that Britain has ever done. Here, the nation appears simultaneously as one in need of modernisation and one that is already, of itself, engaging in the process. It requires only that the nation be roused from its slumbers and revolutionised so it can face up to hard choices that it must accept or die - hard choices foisted on us by the inexorable march of human progress but lived up to by this Christian world-historical movement. Modernisation thus emerges as a given, legitimated both by its inevitability and by being located within the very character of the nation. We shall return to this.

'Modernisation has a respectability with the left, not least because it sounds progressive'

Thirdly, we can begin to see how the blanket use of the term furthers an impression of inevitability and necessity. Forces are at work bringing about the need for modernisation. Such forces are inevitable and clearly definable - technological transformation, the 'obvious' failure of the social democratic welfare state, globalisation and so forth. Since such forces are irreversible the political challenge becomes construed as one of living up to these forces rather than assessing them and deciding how politics should respond to them. This further means that specific reforms to core state services, such as education and health, can be justified on the basis of their *a priori* (and unquestionable) necessity rather than on the basis of whether or not they make sense and achieve some stated end other than merely being in accord with forces beyond our control.

All of this makes for a profoundly anti-political outlook. It reduces politics to the management of state and society in the interests of a given, even algorithmic, world economy. Political actions become justified as the result of the inevitable pressures of this irreversible economic logic. As Chantal Mouffe has noted: 'The usual justification for the "there is no alternative" dogma is globalisation ... This kind of argument takes for granted the ideological terrain which has been established as a result of years of neo-liberal hegemony and transforms what is a conjunctural state of affairs into an historical necessity' (Chantal Mouffe, *Soundings* 9).

Similarly, Doreen Massey points out that the term 'globalisation' has become

a 'de-politicised, unexamined, assumption', spoken of as if it is a given, inevitable, process and in such generalisable terms that its 'politico-economic specificity' is obscured. Globalisation is a politically motivated *neo-liberal* globalisation but is treated as if it is a *deus-ex-machina* to which we had just better get used to.³

However, globalisation and modernisation are not inter-changeable and it is noticeable that it is the latter that, so far, dominates Blairite rhetoric. While clearly often informed by a crude globalisation thesis Blairites speak of modernisation more often. This, I suggest, is because the term has a respectability with the left, not least because it sounds progressive, but also because it has a history in the thinking of the British Left and in the Labour Party. Modernisation is part of our tradition. It is to this we now turn.

The origins of modernisation

The idea of modernisation has long been a part of the intellectual tool box of the British Labour Party, not least since Crosland. However it would be a mistake to think that it can mean the same now as it has in the past. Blair and New Labour's use of the term contributes to a reshaping of its implications at the same time as that use is shaped by the term's history. There is not space here to undertake anything like a full genealogy of 'modernisation' but there are clearly some key moments.

The 'problematic' of modernisation has marked theories and analyses of the British state, society and economy for a long time. The left variant of this analysis crystallised in the celebrated Anderson/Nairn theses: the argument that '1688' and all that represented an incomplete, possibly 'premature', bourgeois revolution. By not having a 'proper' revolution Britain failed to eradicate the feudal legacy, leading to a compromise arrangement where new structures of capital co-existed with an archaic 'superstructure' encompassing aristocratic traditionalism and unable to embrace the necessary processes of 'rationalisation' to develop a fully modern state form.

From this perspective, the British state is understood as incompletely modernised (where modernisation is in some sense a necessary and 'normal' path of development) and new political projects can be analysed in terms of how they match up to the demands of modernising Britain. The Wilson and

3. Doreen Massey, 'Problems with Globalisation', Editorial, *Soundings* 7.

Heath governments, for example, could be interpreted in terms of failed attempts at bringing about modernisation. Is it possible that, in some measure, the Blair project conceives itself as modernisation on this scale?

That this perspective does influence Blairism is incontestable, for it is part of the intellectual landscape of most of the British left. It informs the analysis of Will Hutton, for example, and was a key point for analyses of Thatcherism developed by important writers such as Andrew Gamble and Stuart Hall. In particular, modernisation formed an underlying theme to the perspectives developed in the 1980s in the pages of *Marxism Today*. Theories of British decline were predicated on variants of the Anderson-Nairn theses and from them emerged the view that Britain required something called modernisation and that Thatcherism was to be understood as a failed attempt at 'regressive-modernisation'. Thus in 1987, for example, Eric Hobsbawm, in *Marxism Today*, called for Labour to establish a coalition of interests dedicated to bringing about modernisation of the British economy. 'Labour will return to office only as a party which offers such a New Deal: modernisation - and in a human and responsible manner. Whatever the long-term prospects for Britain, what the country needs now for any kind of future is such a transformation.'⁴ This entailed accepting some of the Thatcherite reforms and accepting that Labour should be ready to 'disrupt old habits and practices'. Hobsbawm also called for a combination of market and state planning that would enable a socially responsible modernisation incorporating a commitment to social justice. It is easy to see this sort of argument reflected in contemporary New Labour.

The *Marxism Today* analysis, inasmuch as it ever amounted to a single coherent view, was underpinned by a reasonably weighty theoretical approach and a recognition that Thatcherism was a strategic political project aiming to realign the balance of forces in the state and economy and establish a new hegemonic consensus. The prescription was the organisation of a counter-hegemonic project binding together social groups into an alliance that would certainly represent some sort of modernising force but would do so in order to respond to and direct economic forces and changes towards goals of equity, autonomy, democracy and social justice. One cannot doubt that this still informs, in some way, the theories of Labour policy makers. One can doubt,

4. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Out of the Wilderness', *Marxism Today*, October 1987, p17.

Soundings

though, the extent to which the implications of the *Marxism Today* analysis were fully understood.

Modernisation in *Marxism Today* was the name of a political project (not an economic process) that would modernise in order to unite a broad coalition of interests and secure a new hegemony. The impression given by the current Labour rhetoric of modernisation is that it is the name of a single impersonal process to which political projects are subordinate. The distinction is crucial. The former regards modernisation as something to be achieved, shaped by the strategic use of the state as an educative instrument (in the singular Gramscian rather than Blairite triplicate sense). But New Labour regards modernisation as something independent of politics and as an inevitable process. The state can only be used to enhance competitiveness and make the country fit for participation in the new world.

The danger of this mutation in left thinking was always implicit within the Anderson-Nairn theses. That perspective tended to treat the form of the state in Britain as an invariable given. It can be too easy to think as if the British state, at some fundamental level, hasn't really changed since the 1688 'settlement'. This constitutes the state structure itself as the problem and downplays the need to address the impact differing political strategies and ideologies have had. From such a perspective the state is conceived in very narrow terms as a set of constitutional structures and procedures. All one has to do is establish the correct formula for 'modernising' it and then apply it while damning all criticism of the true way as pre-modern and out of touch with reality. This, of course, is what New Labour is doing.

It is not my intention to simply reject all the analyses of Hutton, *Marxism Today* or indeed all the ideas informing the present government. Rather, it is to stress the irreducibly political nature of the state and of strategies oriented towards re-ordering that state. Such strategies cannot follow a pre-ordained recipe since they are ongoing political processes. The state we are in is not simply the result of ancient historical exceptionalism. It is a state shaped by the political strategies of the past. It is a Thatcherite state and can only be re-shaped when this is recognised and surpassed.

The danger is that modernisation will be subordinated to other discourses with purchase on the term. Not the least of these is the new neo-liberal orthodoxy that is sustained by the Clintonite strategy of 'triangulation' and seeks

only to conform to perceived shifts in the electorate and economy. Subject to discourses of modernisation of this sort, that which is contingent is transformed into the necessary. Economic policy is 'de-politicised' as it becomes a matter of inevitability. Modernisation comes to mean subordination to a set of assumptions about economic development rather than the shaping of present conditions to contribute to a social good. The rhetoric of modernisation both marks these tendencies in New Labour ideology and helps to produce them. It contains within it implications *of* a deterministic kind but also, in being a term with a specific history in the British Labour Party, helps to anchor the discourse, to some extent, within the traditions of that party. The critical question is whether modernisation is uttered in the language of the labour movement, the language of Marxist history, the language of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy or a new language invented by Tony Blair and advisers. It seems likely that it comes from all of these, enabling the modernising project to appeal to a variety of political, economic and intellectual constituencies. Whether or not it ultimately means the success of neo-liberal paradigms is perhaps still an open question. As Dennis Potter once commented 'the trouble with words is you don't know whose mouths they've been in.' And without scrutiny of where a word like 'modernisation' has been and how it is being used, intellectual associates of New Labour may find themselves losing their voice.

Modernisation and nationalism

We have already made mention of another, broader, 'archaeology' underneath the term 'modernisation' that requires our attention. Its reference is not confined to the development and decline of the British state and economy since 1688 nor to contemporary strategic political disputes over perceived globalisation. The very idea of modernising, of becoming more modern, implies certain assumptions about the process of history as a particular sort of linear progression. It is in this sense that modernisation finds itself closely allied to the idea of the nation.

The association between nationalism and the sociological notion of modernisation is well attested to in scholarship of the phenomenon. For Marxist and liberal historians alike, the nation (and being a nation state) is understood as a hallmark of modernity. The nation defines the abstract form of community that predominates in the industrialised world to such an extent that, as post-colonial theorists from India to Ireland have argued, it comes to appear as if, to be modern,

Soundings

one must first pass through the necessary stage of acquiring nationhood.

The 'imagining' of national community derives from and entails notions of modernisation and combines within it a very specific sense of time, history and space. As Benedict Anderson argues, to imagine the nation is to imagine a large collective of people all occupying the same time and space: 'the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.'⁵ To imagine the nation means also to imagine a particular, and modern, notion of history as a sequence of causally related events moving in some direction. And the reverse is also true. To imagine time, or history, in that way means also to imagine the vehicle that moves in and through that history. The vehicle which has been bequeathed to us is the nation.

'Modernisation', for New Labour, implies just such a notion of history in terms of some sort of progressive development driven by some sort of external force. Hence the frequent connection of modernisation with the nation. As the nation is the body subject to the forces of modernisation it is this which must be reconceived and rebranded and it is in it we must find the already written path to the pre-ordained future. Hence a concern with Britishness and, as we have seen, with locating Blairism in the given characteristics of that nation. This perhaps accounts in part for New Labour's tendency to celebrate very particular aspects of current popular culture in Britain and for the ease with which the death of Diana could be incorporated into the mission.

In the case of Blair's nationalist rhetoric, a rhetoric necessarily in conjunction with that of modernisation, the intention is to establish as already there that which is needed to legitimate the proposed 'change'. Such an ideological manoeuvre is far from unique to Blair and New Labour but it holds unique dangers. Not the least of these is the situation of such discourse in a state always made up of different national identities (and one more than a little contrary region) at a time of much vaunted devolution. There are contradictions between this attempt to mobilise a notion (essentially London-centric) of Britishness when Scotland and Wales are finally getting recognition for themselves.

In employing patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric Blair presents his approach as in the interest of the British people because it is already

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd edn, Verso, London 1993, p26.

coincident with their core characteristics. The circularity between this definition of the nation and the pre-defined facts of modernisation can potentially act to exclude those who do not fit either. A party that sees itself as in charge of a historically pre-defined national mission is prone to underestimating the complex nature of the cultural transformation it is demanding and the extent to which it requires assistance from those outside the party's charmed circle. Furthermore, outside of international football competitions and the death of royals it is not at all certain that a rhetoric of nationhood even carries much force. In established nation states the rhetoric of nation is always about leaving things in place rather than uprooting them, at most encouraging only 'reform in order to conserve'.

But the prime danger with this populist patriotism is that it closes the loop with the rhetoric of modernisation. It renders change a matter of inevitability, a pre-established given, rather than something to be achieved. It is dictated by the forces of global production which must work in harmony with the nation since the nation is now defined as... that which seeks to work in harmony with the forces of global production. Thus, Blair's populism further de-politicises an accommodation to contingent economic and political forces. Perhaps most sadly, given the probably good intentions of many in New Labour, such a process acts entirely against the reinvigoration of civic and public life. Why have a civic life if change is a matter of economic inevitability that is *a priori* and in harmony with the people.⁷ Anyone who whines about this just isn't one of 'the people'. We are, I think, familiar with this sort of thinking. It is part of Blair's inheritance from an 'old' left.

Conclusion

The rhetoric of modernisation can be seen to function as a way of drawing antagonistic lines of exclusion and inclusion. On one side is that which is modernised or attuned to modernisation and this is always good (if sometimes requiring a 'hard choice'). The other side is always, by definition, out of touch and anti-modernisation. Any institution or practice that is perceived as not working perfectly is held to require 'modernisation'. From this there inevitably follows the necessity of this thing called modernisation and the call for a new way that claims merit from recognising this supposed historical exigency and conforming to it. In a peculiar sense this aspect of the Blair project follows a

certain vulgar Marxist tendency in that it regards itself as in line with a given logic external to its own political interventions.

The danger here is that rather than an opening up or broadening out of political thought, action and the constituencies drawn into politics, modernising New Labour will bring about a major narrowing - it is open to anyone so long as they accept the inevitability of a particular logic of social and economic development. The logic is one of submitting to trends and forces not assessing them and shaping them to go where we want them to. While reforms appear to be about opening things up to more flexibility and choice, tailoring what is offered to suit the multifarious needs of the unemployed, sick, disabled and so forth, they will not entail any opening up or extension of democracy if they are motivated by the desire to conform to a narrow logic. The choice offered will end up as that between accepting the inevitable or being given up on - no choice at all.

The rhetoric of modernisation may contain a drive for closure and enforced unity rather than diversity. People will be forced to change in order to satisfy the presumed needs of an economy fetishised as an independent force rather than the economy being shaped to fit whatever people decide are their needs. Flexibility of welfare will be about making us lean and hungry for global competition, not about being open-ended, diverse and democratic. Part of the achievement of Thatcherism was a 'de-politicisation' of the economy in order to present it as something to which we should live up to. This tendency is being furthered by the rhetoric of modernisation. In this context Blair's nationalist rhetoric closes the space even further, seeking to find the motor for such change already in place in the intrinsic characteristics of the nation when it was precisely these characteristics that the Anderson-Nairn thesis sought to critique.

If Blairism is not to be a way of recycling and re-presenting the neo-liberal consensus (because it doesn't engage rigorously and intellectually with the thought of neo-liberalism, seeking merely to bolt on some sort of ill-defined communitarian perspective) then it is exceptionally important to critically assess the rhetoric of modernisation. If New Labour hasn't broken with the Thatcherite settlement then the 'choice' and 'open-ness' it promises will be conceived in market terms. Freedom or autonomy will continue to be understood as equivalent to the extension of consumer based

choice. If freedom and autonomy are to be thought through properly then we must break with market logic and think in terms of proper participation predicated on some notion of civic (and hence collective) engagement. This of course demands that those excluded be included - economically, socially and politically. In short equality has to be part of the agenda, indeed has to be part of 'modernisation' contrasted with the archaism of increasing poverty and widening gulfs of inequality.

We are not in some new space and time given to us by the generous motor of history. We are embedded within the Thatcherite restructuring of state and society - part of the 'momentous changes' that are upon us are the result of Thatcherite political actions not merely the result of impersonal economic or historical forces. The contemporary challenge is, in short, to be political at all: to conceive of state and society as political arrangements which require a deep rooted democratic culture of participation in order to shape, as far as possible, the future we think we might like to live in. The rhetoric of modernisation, with attendant themes of globalisation and nationalism, seeks to find change already upon us and directing us. It forgets that, although we do it in limited circumstances, it is 'we' who make history.