Introduction: a new political coalition?

The end of the previous chapter drew attention to social insecurity on the part of Middle England (the middle classes and aspirant middle classes) as a potential source of political dissatisfaction with neo-liberalism. As with all social change and potential change, the different social strata behind it are likely to have different reasons. Moreover there may be conflicting motivations underlying the stance of even one social grouping or social movement. In the case under discussion at the end of the last chapter, part of the picture may be defensive, inward-looking or reactionary motivations to rejections of neo-liberalism. It is against this that Blairism can paint itself as progressive while embodying a neo-liberalism not all that distinct from Thatcherism. Yet alternatives to neo-liberalism (and to its Blairite alter ego) may take account of legitimate insecurities while seeking a more progressive basis to solving them.

A useful reminder comes from the United States in the 1980s, that insecure classes and strata may seek unsuitable solutions to their plight. In revisiting the basis for American conservatism, Alan Wolfe (1982) pointed out that insecure strata in the US, troubled by various sources of economic and social insecurity, often demanded more of the same causes which were producing that economic and social insecurity. The reasons for this are of course ideological and cultural in significant part. The rhetoric of conservatism (simplicity; old values; rejection of modernity) was often preached by political forces, on the Right, whose economic stance (laissez-faire capitalism) produced more of the social instability which was troubling in the first place. But such a phenomenon explains both the power and yet also instability of the conservative coalition which climbed back to power at the presidential...
level with Reagan and which is still electorally powerful at the end of the twentieth century: the Republicans in control of both houses of Congress after 1994 represented a variety of Right-wing sentiments, beliefs in minimal government and a kind of neo-liberalism, yet also – when push comes to shove – a belief in American hegemony and even protectionism rather than neo-liberalism were the two to be in conflict. Any Democratic resurgence is very much on a Republican agenda, with the exception of lifestyle issues and personal freedoms.

In Britain today, at a time when both national and international factors and political economy are preventing a traditional ‘Left/Right’ distinction as the main cleavage in party politics, both Blairism, on the one hand, and those minority forces which reject neo-liberalism, on the other hand, seek to paint each other as reactionary. And with partial truth: there are progressive and reactionary elements in both, and the rejection of neo-liberalism in particular has the capacity to be backward-looking from a cultural or libertarian viewpoint. Only a political coalition greater than the sum of its parts, providing an alternative to neo-liberalism, is likely to be able to transcend this backwardness in constructing a political programme. That is why it is so difficult: such a coalition would cut across traditional political cleavages and also challenge traditional assumptions.

To put it in a more concrete manner, socialists and radicals who reject neo-liberalism would have to recognise both the inadequacy of ‘socialism in one country’, on the one hand, and would also have to recognise some long-established aspirations on the part of middle-class and conservative elements threatened by neo-liberalism. On the part of the latter, Middle England would have to recognise that ‘demanding more of the same’ as a response to its troubles is inadequate. That is, a new political economy – while not rejecting ‘the market’ where it is appropriate – would have to have as part of its core objectives social solidarity and economic stability as well as individual self-betterment. For it is unfettered economic individualism which actually uproots middle-class as well as working-class communities.

It is always easier to interpret social change retrospectively, despite the often contested nature of rival interpretations as to historical change. Just as modern political science failed to predict the end of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s (with the exception of the Manichean propagandists on the Right in the USA), no one is currently predicting the form of the world in the event of either the collapse of, or a significant challenge to neo-liberalism. Yet in 20 or 30 years’ time, we may be looking back in order to explain exactly such a transformation.