Debating the Third Way

What, if anything, does the ‘Third Way’ offer that is of interest or value to the Left? The answer to the question is complicated by the fact that, despite (or, perhaps, because of) its recent origins, the ‘Third Way’ comprises ‘not one road but many’. In his introduction to The Global Third Way Debate, Giddens refers to the ‘Third Way’ not as a single model but ‘a much more generic series of endeavours . . . to restructure leftist doctrines’ and ‘a broad ideological stream with several tributaries owing into it’ (p. 2). In Where Now for New Labour?, Giddens similarly acknowledges that ‘there are a variety of Third Ways rather than a single one, since countries have different political traditions . . .’ (p. 4). The variety within the ‘Third Way’ can be approached analytically in terms of ‘competing philosophical positions’, but it also stems from there being different national and party variants. Giddens claims that the ‘Third-Way’ debate ‘is a worldwide phenomenon . . . [and] . . . almost all centre-left parties have restructured their doctrines in response to it’ (Where Now?, p. 3) and emphasises both the global reach of the ‘Third Way’ and its ideological coherence. However, both of these claims are open to question. It is certainly true that rethinking and repositioning among centre-left parties has been something of a worldwide phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, and the ‘Third-Way’ debate has been marked by some high-level international summits and declarations (notably the Blair-Schröder joint declaration, 1999). However,
it is less clear that ‘there is an overall political orientation and policy programme emerging’ as Giddens claims (Debate, p. 3), that is a coherent ideological framework or narrow conception of the ‘Third Way’. Rather, the common aim to ‘restructure leftist doctrines’ seems to involve a rather broad concept. Further, many centre-left parties in Europe never embraced the ‘Third Way’ (although Giddens suggests they have done so under different labels) and, in any event, the political landscape of Europe, has shifted again since the ‘magical return of social democracy’ in the 1990s (Cuperus & Kandel, quoted in Where Now?, p. 7). Today, the ‘Third Way’ is most closely associated with the thinking and policies of New Labour in the UK, whose second term Blair declared as ‘Third Way, Phase Two’. Giddens’s own work, closely associated with New Labour, is foremost among attempts to set out a coherent framework for the ‘Third Way’. This article reviews some central aspects of the debate on the ‘Third Way’ within the Left, using as a starting point Giddens’s most recent books and Callinicos’s forceful critique Against the Third Way.

According to Giddens, the ‘Third Way’ is an updated version of social democracy that remains ‘unequivocally a politics of the left’ on account of the core values it upholds. In particular, ‘to be on the left is to . . . have a commitment to equality’ (Debate, p. 5). It is an updated version of social democracy because it embraces new means to realise these values. The defining claim of the ‘Third Way’ is that ‘Leftist parties are being forced to pioneer something new, since the core doctrines of socialism are no longer applicable’ (Debate, p. 2), that is, they no longer work. More specifically, the ‘death of socialism’ (the ‘first way’ in both its variants – old-style social democracy and the planned economies) is characterised in terms of its failure as ‘a theory of the managed economy’ (Debate, p. 2) and ‘system of economic management’. Since socialism has passed away, the new means must recognise as a fundamental constraint that there are no alternatives to capitalism. The underlying problem for socialism, and the reason its ‘core doctrines’ will not work any longer, is that it has been left behind by social change. ‘Third way politics is about how left of centre parties should respond to . . . transformations which are altering the landscape of politics – globalization, the emergence of the knowledge economy, and profound changes in people’s everyday lives’ (Debate, p. 3). Thus, a full critical assessment of the ‘Third Way’ needs to examine these three elements and the connections between them: (i) a theory of social change; (ii) the identification of means appropriate to the new social conditions that we encounter; and (iii) the values that the means are intended to realise. These elements are connected in the following formula: constancy in values in the face of radically altered social conditions requires novelty in means.

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