

Book Review: Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian edited by Des Freedman

In Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian, editor Des Freedman brings together contributors on the newspaper's bicentenary to offer a critical look at its recent and remote past, focusing particularly on its liberal values, institutional continuity and its political position. In exploring the paper's ambivalent relationship with capitalism and the political Left, the book offers a forceful intervention in current debates within British progressive politics, writes **Vaios Papanagnou**.

***Capitalism's Conscience: 200 Years of the Guardian*. Des Freedman (ed.). Pluto Press. 2021.**

With its publication coinciding with the *Guardian's* bicentenary, [Capitalism's Conscience](#) offers a critical look at the newspaper's recent and remote past. The book is an edited collection of fifteen essays: it opens with two chapters that look into the political, cultural and financial foundations of the *Guardian*. It continues with a series of chapters on the newspaper's ambivalence when it comes to fostering relations of solidarity; and it ends with several chapters on the past decade, particularly scrutinising the *Guardian's* largely hostile stance towards Jeremy Corbyn's Labour leadership. Together, the various authors launch a critique against the *Guardian*, attacking three of its key characteristics: its liberal values, its institutional continuity and its centrist politics.

The thrust of the book's argument is that the *Guardian* is a newspaper with liberal values that has always been an unreliable ally for the Left, if not outright hostile to it. As editor Des Freedman straightforwardly argues in the book's introduction, the 'guardianista' as a progressive public sector worker who votes for Labour and identifies with the Left's political struggles is nothing but a media stereotype.

The *Guardian's* opposition to the Left, as Freedman goes on to show in his account of the newspaper's foundations, is not due to any recent changes in its editorial direction. It is the liberal values of its founders that form the *Guardian's* DNA. Founded by John Edward Taylor in 1821 and supported by a group of Mancunian businessmen, the *Manchester Guardian* advocated for parliamentary reform, religious freedom and free trade. In pursuing this reformist agenda, the *Guardian* stood against the militant labour movement of the time that demanded universal suffrage and working-class rights.

Representing the interests of the liberal bourgeoisie of the early nineteenth century, the *Guardian* effectively contained these more radical demands. A few years after the *Guardian's* first centenary, as Aaron Ackerley shows in his chapter on the organisation's political economy, the commitment to liberal values, together with the belief in objective and rational journalistic procedures, formed the foundational principles of the Scott Trust, the company that funds the *Guardian*.

The Scott Trust secured the *Guardian's* financial independence and was instrumental in safeguarding the organisation's continuity. As Gary Younge puts it, 'There is something of the Kremlin in the Guardian: it's governed by a Trust which inherits a set of values, and its editors last for a very long time' (46). The Kremlin metaphor hints at the continuity of the *Guardian's* traditional values, which every appointed editor is instructed to uphold.





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The *Guardian's* continuity, a characteristic that speaks to the institutional properties of the organisation, underpins the paper's homogeneous relations. Younger claims that the Trust's board members, as well as most of the paper's editors and journalists, are individuals with shared values and backgrounds. As he mentions, it was traditionally people from within these circles that were given work experience internships. Homophily characterises also the *Guardian* columnists' relations who, according to Tom Mills's social network analysis, prefer to speak among themselves on Twitter and with other elite political actors.

The *Guardian's* traditional attachment to liberal values, as three of the middle chapters of the book show, has prevented the paper from fully extending its solidarity to the international struggles that are important to the Left. Looking back at her time as a joint editor of the *Third World Report*, Victoria Brittain recalls how this section that hosted voices from the Global South existed in the periphery of the *Guardian's* newsroom. Nonetheless, 'obscurity allowed us the gift of extraordinary independence', she writes (57).

In a more polemical chapter, Alan MacLeod denounces the newspaper's coverage of the leftist Latin American governments of the last two decades. As he shows, on many occasions the *Guardian* has failed to uphold its own standards of objective reportage and solidarity with the underprivileged citizens of these nations. Ghada Karmi finds the *Guardian's* stance on the Palestinian struggle fairer than most British newspapers, but still firmly within a mainstream position of taking equal distance between the two warring sides.

In the final chapters of the book, the *Guardian's* centrist politics come under attack. This critique becomes particularly prominent in the essays that scrutinise the *Guardian's* stance against Corbyn. Whilst it is acknowledged (in Mike Berry's chapter) that the *Guardian* was largely in favour of Corbynite economics, the main idea here seems to be captured by Mike Wayne when he writes that the newspaper effectively 'helped to isolate Corbyn, demolish his personal legitimacy, separate him from his base' (270).

Mareile Pfannebecker and Jilly Boyce Kay demonstrate how a neoliberal feminist discourse was mobilised by the *Guardian's* columnists to discredit Corbyn's leadership 'as a form of "brocialism" that was intrinsically misogynist' (130). Justin Schlosberg's analysis reveals the inaccuracies of the *Guardian's* framing of a Labour party rift with antisemitism under Corbyn. Finally, Wayne argues that on the issue of Brexit, 'Corbyn was assailed by liberalism as a representative of an illegitimate left well outside the traditions of parliamentary democracy' (268).

If the *Guardian* functions as 'capitalism's conscience', the book argues, it is because it simultaneously justifies and restrains capitalism. As a newspaper within the liberal establishment, it seeks to restrain the anti-social elements of capitalism by foregrounding the democratic demands of various social groups, including minorities of race, gender and ethnicity. In so doing, it justifies capitalism as an order in which individual emancipation is possible through struggles for recognition. Nonetheless, the authors contend, the *Guardian's* journalism stops short of fully enacting in practice the civic ideals that it stands for. If it claims a cosmopolitan outlook, it excludes the international movements of the disadvantaged. If it champions diversity, it remains parochially homogeneous. If it challenges the patriarchy, it adopts a sex-based feminist discourse. If it addresses the centre-Left, it sabotages the Left-led Labour Party's electoral chances.

Capitalism's Conscience can be appreciated as a forceful intervention in the current debates within the British progressive political field. Traditionally represented by Labour, this is a political space currently in the throes of the rift between the two tendencies that historically vie for hegemony over the party's values, ideas and policies. As the book effectively argues, the socialist Left's primary antagonist is to be found in the liberal wing of Labour that dominates the parliamentary party. It is to the former group, the democratic socialists who rallied behind Corbyn, that the book seeks to offer a critical explanation of what went wrong. It does so by highlighting the ideological role that media institutions such as the *Guardian* can still play. The force of this explanation lies with its emphasis on the systemic character of the attacks against Corbyn. Moving against counter-arguments that insist on Labour's own tactical errors and political communication failures, the book elucidates the historically structured character of the Left's recent and ongoing battles.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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