

Book Review: Left Without a Future? Social Justice in Anxious Times

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In this book, **Anthony Painter** advocates new economic, social and cultural policies which provide a manifesto for the future development of Social Democracy – and centre-left institutions – in Britain. **Left Without a Future?** is an engaging read and one of the better, more innovative responses from the centre-left to the challenges posed in post-crisis Britain. This is a valuable contribution, but – with Ed Miliband flirting with different ideas – it remains to be seen whether it is an influential one, writes **Daniel Sage**.



Left Without a Future? Social Justice in Anxious Times. Anthony Painter. I.B. Tauris. July 2013.

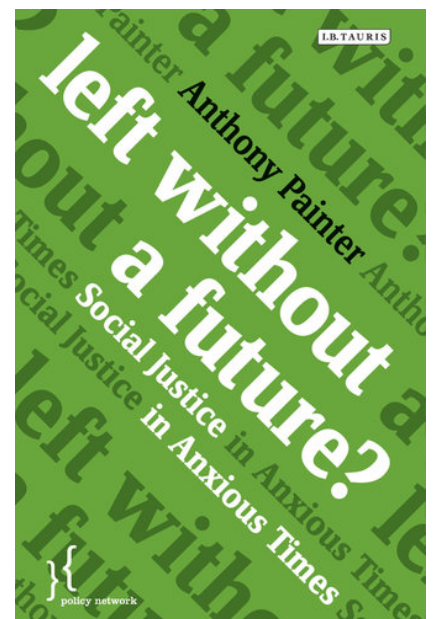
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That the Left was caught intellectually unaware by the financial crisis has only become so blindingly obvious in its aftermath. With the dominant model of political economy shattered, different schools of revisionist thinking have emerged, re-emerged and sometimes sank with little trace. [Certain academics and think-tanks](#) have argued that the centre-left should focus on reducing inequalities. Meanwhile, [traditional social democrats](#) have been reinvigorated by the crisis and believe that the future is in a form of neo-Keynesianism: state intervention in the economy, redistribution and a stronger welfare state. [Communitarianism has also made a comeback](#), pointing to the way in which a supposedly rampant liberalism has ruptured community life and damaged social bonds.

These ideas represent the different families within the Left: the liberal-left, old-style social democrats and conservative left-moralists. Anthony Painter's new book, *Left Without a Future?*, sees the entry of a new voice into this debate: the pragmatist, liberal-right of Labour. This family believes in freedom and capitalism but also has a strong social conscience: they believe in the importance of giving people control over their own lives and equality of power, capability and opportunity. They have been rather silent so far in debates surrounding centre-left revisionism. Tony Blair, after all, belongs to this group.

If traditional social democrats are calling for a neo-Keynesianism, Painter's book can be seen as the manifesto for a neo-Third Way. Painter even borrows the philosophical starting point of the early New Labour thinkers: how do you carve out a space between old social democracy and neoliberalism? In post-crisis Britain, this dichotomy is between a resurgent 'vulgar Keynesianism' and an equally vulgar 'masochistic' neoliberalism. Painter's aim is to offer the Left a way out of its crisis that eschews these two old solutions.

Left without a Future? is really split into two arguments. Argument one offers an analysis of how economic, cultural and social changes have made traditional social democracy obsolete. The analysis in these sections is particularly strong and explains the different 'bubbles, networks and tribes' that make up modern Britain, set in contrast to the definable class structure of old. This is problematic for social democracy, argues Painter, because as an ideology it was rooted in an industrial, largely manufacturing-based society: characterised by a large working-class with a deep sense of solidarity. This is a different world to the plural, complex society of today.



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Given these changes, argument two offers policy solutions. According to Painter, these solutions should revolve around 'institution-building'. This is because the old redistributive approach of social democracy is both (a) non-applicable to the pluralistic, less class-driven UK and (b) failed to deliver social justice. The institutions Painter proposes spread economic (living wages, work associations), social (better funded childcare, an expansion of technical colleges) and democratic (more powers for local government) dimensions. For Painter, these institutions offer the best route to sustainable, long-term social justice. In other words: [predistribute don't redistribute](#).

Where Painter is strongest is in analysing the economic and socio-cultural changes that have give the Left ultimately existential challenges. Further, the focus on 'institution-building' offers a new way for the Left to think about social policy in a world where redistribution via the social security system is a politically and economically toxic idea.



Credit: [Ed Miliband](#) CC BY 2.0

However, given that in [previous work](#) Painter has put a large emphasis on fiscal discipline, it is remarkable what little attention is devoted to how a future Labour government would afford the widespread expansion of institutions he calls for. Building institutions as opposed to increasing benefits is a persuasive argument. However, the inevitable question – which those on the Left will be asked increasingly in the years to come – remains: where do you get the money from? After the Coalition's deep welfare reforms, there is certainly little to raid from the social security budget.

There is also a lingering sense throughout the book that there is no big idea to tie all these threads together. Painter the pragmatist might take this as a compliment, but 'the vision thing' is vital if you want to transform capitalism and usher in a new consensus.

Left Without a Future? is an engaging read and one of the better, more innovative responses from the centre-left to the challenges posed in post-crisis Britain. Its focus on institution-building as a way to fight social injustices in a plural, complex society is convincing. However, Painter is on stronger ground on some issues compared to others (his ideas about what the Left can do on identity are far stronger than what it can do on, for example, welfare), and there remain question marks about the practicalities of the proposed approach. This is a valuable contribution, but – with Ed Miliband flirting with different ideas – it remains to be seen whether it is an influential one.

Daniel Sage is a PhD student at the University of Stirling. His PhD thesis explores how welfare-to-work reforms have affected the experiences and interactions of benefit claimants with the welfare system. Additionally, he has academic interests in income inequality and social cohesion, public attitudes towards the welfare state and the politics and philosophy of social policy. He has a BA in History from University College London and an MSc in Social Policy from the LSE. He tweets at [@djsage86](#) and blogs at <http://knowledge-is-porridge.blogspot.com>. [Read reviews by Daniel.](#)

