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TESTING SOCIAL DEMOCRACY'S INNER LIMITS: FROM COLLECTIVISM TO THE POLITICS OF DISSONANCE IN BRITAIN

BY

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In a world where transitions to democracy are often turbulent, interrupted, and uncertain, it is easy to think of Britain, where an embryonic form of parliamentary democracy emerged in the seventeenth century as an exception because the basic shape of politics has appeared settled for so long. On the contrary, I will argue, since the 1970s Britain has been fundamentally transformed from a consensus-driven, institutionally cohesive, model West European democracy, into a fractious, institutionally rigid, and quite unresponsive political system. I will suggest that these developments in Britain have broader comparative significance for they help identify a critical shift from *social democracy or collectivism* to what I call a post-collectivist *politics of dissonance*.

I. HISTORICAL AND INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT

Despite its century-long decline, until the mid-1970s Britain inspired a model of harmonious, positive-sum politics, crystallized in Samuel H. Beer's classic study *British Politics in the Collectivist Age* (Beer 1965).[1] As distinct from a liberal individualist model, *collectivism* meant, first, that the State assumed overall responsibility for economic governance and social welfare and, secondly, that the political instruments for policymaking were collective: government operated by mobilizing powerful make-or-break constituencies, such as trade union and business confederations. Collectivism, likewise, assumed the Keynesian paradigm of full employment, broad generalized consumption, and demand-driven growth, and it presupposed expanding social provision associated with Esping-Andersen's (1990) liberal welfare state regime.

Accordingly, Britain's mid-twentieth century collectivism may be located within the general framework of social-democratic compacts or policy regimes typical of the postwar settlement era preceding the oil shocks of the 1973–74 period, although it clearly represents a minimalist model. It was weaker in its institutional

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[1] The book was published in Britain with the title *Modern British Politics: A Study in Parties and Pressure Groups*, and a new edition was subsequently introduced in 1982 in the United States with that title. I will henceforth follow Beer's own usage and refer to the work as *Modern British Politics*.

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reach (the National Economic Development Council was no Commissariat Général du Plan) and less robust in its policy aims—no serious consideration was given to worker participation as in German co-determination or works councils, and never even a hint of collective share ownership through the build up of wage earner funds as in Sweden's Meidner Plan. Moreover, although British tripartism, particularly in the area of incomes policies, involved the characteristic corporatist practice of state bargaining with peak associations, its episodic and one-sided nature, involving labor more than business, and the low durability of the bargains struck have tended to locate Britain very much on the edge of the corporatist model originally designed for Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands (Schmitter 1974, Goldthorpe 1984).

It is therefore not surprising that when European comparativists speak of the "limits of Social Democracy" it seems quite natural and appealing to view Sweden, with the SAP so dominant for six decades until 1991, its high union density, and impressive package of reform initiatives, as the *locus classicus* (Przeworski 1985, Pontusson 1992). But the British case, with its far more modest pretensions and its apparent solidity, represents an important chastening alternative. In a Europe beset by increasingly restive constituencies and the neo-liberal belt-tightening pressures imposed by the stringent convergence criteria of the Maastricht Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the Stability and Growth Pact protocol, it has become increasingly important to test the social democratic model to its *inner* limits. The British case represents a baseline social-democratic model, in its heyday a significant and apparently durable achievement. A study of its denouement and a positive account of the emergent politics of dissonance may, therefore, help illuminate wider European developments.

At its high point the collectivist polity enjoyed a symbiosis or *consonance* among its constituent elements. To borrow Beer's evocative language, the *ideal foundations* of the civic culture, a mix of deference and pragmatism (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980; Beer 1982) shaped—and were re-enforced by—its *choice mechanism* (a hybrid system of parliamentary representation augmented by functional or corporatist representation). At the same time, relatively stable and unified producer groups (class actors) secured the *social foundations* of politics. Both party competition and policy debate operated smoothly within a classic European model of two-class/two-party competition.

Beer's analysis was so sharply drawn and yet familiar, that collectivism enjoyed an almost inescapable appeal. Indeed, the interpretive framework has continued to significantly shape both scholarship and popular understanding of British politics on both sides of the Atlantic even after Beer himself recognized in *Britain Against Itself* (1982) that the heyday of collectivism had already passed.

The model of a politics of dissonance assumes that the stability and sense of harmony associated with collectivism/social democracy was gradually replaced by growing instability and tension. In this model, a cacophony of individual and collective political identities tended to crowd out class politics, critical shifts in values and cultural representation fragment the Almond and Verba civic culture, and external challenges to the authority of the nation-state, focused acutely by the endless Britain/European Union (EU) travails, contribute to an erosion of the mechanism of public choice and a further destabilization of party politics.

In the study of music, consonance and dissonance involve judgments about how pitches (highly focused sounds) combine. Here, in their application to politics, consonance and dissonance identify distinctions in how core components of institutionalized politics combine. I will analyze and describe the growing instability *within* and tension *among* the cultural, political-institutional, and social dimensions of British politics. I hope to show the deterioration of social democracy or collectivism presses beyond the scope of the familiar "decline of the postwar settlement" framework: it warrants consideration of a new model of politics.

The article includes four sections. Section II discusses the approach, suggesting that the demise of collectivism or social democracy—as a network of institutions and practices and as an explicit political project—is embedded within a broader dynamic of the development and transmutation of modernity. Section III analyzes the eclipse of social-democratic politics and identifies the emergent attributes of a post-collectivist age of dissonance. Finally, a concluding section briefly summarizes the claims and assesses the potential comparative implications of the argument.

II. INTERROGATING MODERNITY

Critical transformations in British politics have been overlooked in part because of inadequate efforts to connect the structural bases of politics, cultural transformations, and political-institutional outcomes. Whatever little else they hold in common, both conventional approaches to the study of political culture and the treatment of cultural transformations falling under the rubric of postmodernism fail to make the linkages. Albeit in different ways, each neglects grounded accounts of the structural bases of politics, as well as appreciation of the agency of political subjects. After a brief reprise of the problems with each approach, I hope to show that comparative political analysis would benefit, nonetheless, from careful scrutiny of selective propositions influenced by postmodernist commentaries.

Within the mainstream tradition—although there are important exceptions[2]—the study of British political culture has customarily relied on an uneasy mix of survey research into political attitudes and bland, often weakly supported, generalizations about "a British political culture" described by the familiar characteristics of homogeneity, consensus, and deference. Typically, the attributes of a civic culture—the salutary mix of active and acquiescent orientations that sustain routine democratic participation—are simply taken for granted. For most within this tradition, culture is so firmly habituated and uniformly pervasive that it requires no active agency (Tarrow 1994, p. 120). In fact, few go so far as Beer in emphasizing that culture is not a "confluence" but a "struggle or at least a debate" (Beer 1965, p. xi) with deep generational and potentially divisive reverberations. And none, to my knowledge, interrogate seriously either the structural bases of multiple colliding political cultures or the growing schism between political-institutional and cultural representation.

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[2] Notable exceptions include Hebdige (1988), Sinfield (1989), Gilroy (1991).

Likewise, the problems with postmodernism run deep. All "post-" concepts (post-industrial society, post-fordism, etc.) are by definition unsatisfactory. An account of an era or principle of organization by what might be called *retrospective negation* cannot offer much empirical specificity or conceptual clarity. (We know what it is not—but what is it?) In rejecting meta-narratives and meta-theories (such as those drawn from Marx or Weber or Freud), post-modernists, with Lyotard taken as *locus classicus* (Lyotard 1984, 1988, 1993), refuse to explain the present beyond a set of claims about fragmentation, disjunction, and incredulity. One consequence of this stance is that all normative—and hence all political, programmatic, or ideological—claims are discredited. Actual lived experience in both historical and contemporary domains is recast as narrative (there is nothing real behind the voices or the interpretations or the "language games"). Ironically, as with the more conventional treatments of culture, active agency is exiled and with it the goals, ideals, interests, and solidarities—the intentionality—that animate political life.

Hence, to the degree that it appeals to the authority of history, "postmodernism typically harks back to that wing of thought, Nietzsche in particular, that emphasizes the deep chaos of modern life and its intractability before rational thought" (Harvey 1990, p. 44). Postmodernism is therefore burdened, whatever the proclivities of some adherents, with a nihilistic undertow. The radical skepticism of postmodernist thought leads to interpretations that seem insubstantial because they neglect critical institutions and structures: nation-states, international organizations, class relations, trading blocs, North-South relations, to name a few. Structure joins agency in exile: narratives and subjective interpretations inhabit a barren landscape.

For these reasons postmodernism, *per se*, must be rejected in comparative political analysis. Nevertheless, as I hope to make clear, some elements of a postmodernist *outlook or sensibility* (a skepticism about exclusive or all-encompassing explanations and critical attention to alternative narratives) can be assimilated within a more social-scientific (modernist) *methodology or approach*. The article begins with three claims that are critically appropriated from the debate about the conditions and consequences of "high" modernity.[3] Taken together, the processes they describe have a corrosive influence on the choice mechanism, the social foundations, and the cultural domain of collectivsm/social democracy. Each is discussed briefly in turn.

The Weakening of Governmental Authority and Legitimacy

Postmodern theorists claim that the diversity of lived experience and the terrifying failure rate of progressive political projects render Enlightenment expectations meaningless or obsolete (Lyotard 1998; Norris 1990, p. 7). Accordingly, they reject the "grand narratives" that sustain belief in government: providential accounts of progress engendered by democratic (or revolutionary) ideals or by linear evolutionary theories of modernization or political development. To the extent that citizens and observers reject these narratives, the exercise of power is cut loose from its normative underpinnings. Government action cannot be justified by constitutional authority, national foundation myths, democracy or popular sovereignty, social contract, or natural law (Wolin 1988, p. 179).

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[3] See Giddens (1990, 1991). Giddens analyzes the consequences of modernity for the present (which he calls "radicalised" or more frequently "high" or "late" modernity) while rejecting "post-modernism," as such, an approach adopted here.

The postmodernist claim seems overblown, but a weaker version—skepticism about the normative claims of political actors—may be taken seriously. The *reflexivity of modernity*[4] fuels chronic doubt and perpetually subjects political programs to challenge and revision in light of contrasting claims by experts and the rapid proliferation of alternative models. Thus, grand legitimating motifs are replaced by a host of more contingent and transitory rationales.[5] It is not, as postmodernists claim, that the exercise of power loses all justification, but rather that all claims collide against competing claims. Citizens trying to make sense of a disorienting social world interrogate each and every variant, questioning both the ideological valences and the underlying meanings. Is an appeal to political community an appeal to nation? (If so, how are the disparate national identities within the UK plotted—is it four nations or one?) (Kearney 1991). Or is it an appeal to nation-state (United Kingdom) or to a more cosmopolitan European community? How does an appeal to democracy and popular sovereignty rest alongside specific alternative models (bill of rights, proportional representation, devolution, etc.)? With all justifications suspect and partisan, claims of legitimacy and authority are substantially weakened, their hold more temporary.

The Erosion of a Participant-rationalist Model of Citizenship that Grounds the Civic Culture

To the extent that belief in the State as a vehicle for progress erodes, and with it expectations that the government can achieve positive outcomes through public policy, both the deference to authority and the pragmatic support for less-favored choices (the distinctive traits claimed for British civic culture) may be expected to decline. Consent is reduced to a minimalist revolving door appraisal of the job performance of politicians (Wolin 1988, pp. 179–81) or an assessment of the personal advantage flowing from a stated policy. What happens to a conception of politics grounded in the consent and active participation of a citizen public? As the public is transformed from a group of involved citizens animated by a resonant civic culture to a dissociated mass of transitory opinion holders, the rationalist model of citizenship that grounds the ideal foundations of the collectivist polity dissolves. Nothing remains but the "sullen acquiescence" that

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[4] The concept reflexivity of modernity is Giddens's and the application to politics follows closely from his broader treatment of reflexivity as part of the dynamism of "high modernity" in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991).

[5] For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of narrativity than possible here, see Sommers (1992, pp. 591–630).

Beer identifies as wholly insufficient to the tasks of the collectivist polity (Beer 1982, pp. 12–15).

The Partial Displacement of Class-based Politics and the Fragmentation of Collective Political Action

Finally, among the consequences of modernity may be found the proliferation of competing political identities leading to a fragmentation of politics. Citizens are enmeshed in numerous power networks, and their political identities are shaped by a host of cross-cutting, unresolved, even transitory imprints. They are bombarded by innumerable identity inputs, with no Archimedean escape to reflective equilibrium. As Stuart Hall observes, a "distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century … and fragmenting the … landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality which gave us firm locations" (Hall 1992, pp. 274–75).

As a result, collectivist politics is simultaneously squeezed by contradictory pressures. To some degree, politics is individuated as the interests and social commonality that bind group politics dissolve. But, at the same time, insofar as collective political action continues, class-based politics experiences very serious challenges. Technological change and the globalization of capital intensify the differentiation in actual experiences of work, which takes many forms, including the sorting of jobs by race, gender, and ethnicity, a process that both reflects and crystallizes alternative schemes of collective identity and mobilization and further complicates the contradictory class locations endemic to contemporary capitalist development (Wright 1985). Thus the process of class formation is at the same time a process of class fragmentation that enhances what is often termed *identity politics*—the politics of gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, etc., which include both work-related and quite autonomous cultural components.

These and other processes (discussed below) that weaken the political significance of class shake the social foundations of the collectivist/social democratic polity. Corporatist bargaining cannot readily aggregate the preferences of traditional constituencies insofar as the single-identity voices are crowded by alternative claims and frames of reference. Likewise, the capacity of political parties to perform the functions of choice, aggregation, and consensus is restricted by their legacy of narrow fields of vision, as they remain trapped within a traditional framework of distributive politics. In addition, their effectiveness as purveyors of choice is limited by the sheer difficulty of assimilating and organizing preferences on incommensurable scales. Collectivist politics, like all distributive bargaining, can always "split the difference," a framework that cannot resolve the nonmaterial aspects of disputes over boundaries and inclusion in the political community framed by nationality or ethnicity.

III. FROM COLLECTIVISM TO DISSONANCE

In this section of the paper, I will apply these three axioms to help explain why and how the collectivist/social-democratic polity in Britain was destabilized and to analyze the emergent properties of the politics of dissonance.

The Theory and Practice of Representation: the Choice Mechanism

The choice mechanism of the collectivist polity was grounded, first and foremost, in stable and predictable party competition and government. The acceptance by both major parties of functional representation based on class/productivist identities and the attendant organization of interests was of secondary importance, but nevertheless it carried considerable weight. This measure of corporatism and the political and policy-making inclusion of representatives of the organized interests of labor and capital meant less than the qualities of the party system for the overall authority of government. But it was an important *differentia* of the collectivist polity, and a critical modernizing attribute. Party competition and functional representation will be discussed in turn.

Party Competition

Since the 1970s, significant and widely discussed changes have occurred in the pattern of party competition and the organization and behavior of political parties. These need only be summarized in brief to suggest the distance Britain has traveled from the security of the two-class, two-party system that characterized the collectivist polity.

During the height of collectivism, political identities and electoral behavior displayed a strong correlation with occupation. In the 1950s and early 1960s, those not engaged in manual labor voted Conservative three times more commonly than Labour; and more than two out of three manual workers, by contrast, voted for Labour. Ever since then, the relationship between class position (defined by occupational categories) and voting behavior has become much more complicated. The decline of support for the Labour Party through the 1992 general election is particularly notable in both British and comparative terms, and cannot be explained merely by the familiar changes in the occupational distribution of the work force or character of labor. As Ivor Crewe puts it, “The decline of Labour has proceeded much further and faster than the decline of labor” (Crewe 1992, p. 25).[6] Not only did the British Labour Party suffer the sharpest decline in support of any party on the Left between the beginning of the postwar period and the end of the 1980s, but the Labour vote within the traditional manual working class fell very sharply during the same period (from sixty-three percent in 1951 to forty percent in 1992). Thus, the decline of class-based voting, as Crewe suggests, includes both structural and behavioral aspects.

The advent of New Labour and the two successive landslide victories of 1997 and 2001 reversed the decline of Labour most emphatically, but only hastened the decline of labor. Indeed, apart from the dimensions of the Labour victory, nothing about the May, 1997, general election was more evident than the sharp and apparently accelerating decline in the influence of class location on voting behavior and the unprecedented volatility of the electorate (Butler and Kavanagh 1997, Dunleavy 1997, Norris 1997, Sanders 1998, Krieger 1999). In fact, both “absolute” and “relative” indices confirmed that the association between occupational class and voting behavior weakened very considerably over the last few decades of the twentieth century (Sanders 1998, p. 220).

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[6] The observations that follow are drawn from Crewe (1992, pp. 20–33).

It is likely that the very success of Blair's effort to transform Labour into New Labour blunted the social basis of party identification. As Norris and Evans (1999) argue, Blair's positioning of New Labour at the center of party competition—flanked by the Conservatives on the right and the Liberal Democrats on the left on a number of core policy orientations—has rendered the linkage between class and party more tenuous. The modernization agenda of New Labour resolutely emphasizes fiscal responsibility over distributive politics (while promising improved public services, the key battleground of the 2001 campaign). At the same time, it refocuses government on competitiveness in the global context, in which effective state action would increasingly require European Union (EU) or Group of Seven (G7) cooperation in combination with consistent business cooperation. Taken together, the two component parts of New Labour's modernization initiative naturally contribute to the declining electoral salience of class.

Neither scholarly disagreements over the operational definition and identification of class nor the lack of clarity about the precise effects of class on electoral behavior diminish the significance of this process. In British electoral studies the concept "class" has been applied to occupation within a manual/non-manual divide, private/public cleavages in consumption, and ownership of the means of production and control over other people's labor in the work place (Dunleavy and Husbands 1985, Wright 1985).[7] Unfortunately, none of the camps has offered a convincing causal model of the relationship between class identity/position, however defined, and voting patterns. Thus, the causal explanation is complicated and hotly contested, but the relatively weak, and increasingly opaque, association between occupation and voting seems incontrovertible, despite the patterned preferences in electoral behavior that remain. Compared to Labour supporters, Conservative voters tend to be older and more likely to be employed in the private sector. They are disproportionately employed as nonmanual, nonunionized workers and are more likely to live in owner-occupied housing (Sanders 1993, p.188). These enduring correlations are a source of continuity that spans social-democratic and third-way politics, but efforts to explain electoral results have increasingly focused on variables beyond the voters' occupational or social background (Sanders 1993, p. 191). In the absence of enduring influences, voters are acting more like "discriminating consumers" who eye candidates and issues as they would products for purchase, with little brand loyalty. Hence, factors "closer" to the election such as issue preferences and perceptions of competence matter more, and "deep-seated factors" such as class or party identification matter less (Sanders 1997, 1998; Krieger 1999).

Not surprisingly, there are repercussions for party competition. Since the 1970s—the *decade of dealignment* (Särlvik and Crewe 1983)—any description of the British party system as a two-party system neglects a number of important considerations. First, there has been an upswing in the active competition and agenda-setting influence of a range of "third" parties. In the 1970s, the national parties (Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru) pressed the attack on two-party dominance, although their agenda-setting influence was far greater than their electoral success, while in the 1980s and through the 2001 general election, center parties weakened the electoral dominance of Labour and Conservatives. With the exception of 1979, the third parties, center and national combined, received more than one-fifth of the vote in every general election between February 1974 and 1992. They slipped a fraction to 19.4 percent in 1997 and then, with the strong showing of the Liberal Democrats, rebounded to 20.8 percent in 2001.

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[7] Dunleavy and Husbands, for example, integrate these two dimensions of social class with a more conventional third dimension based on the manual/non-manual divide. They acknowledge the influence of Erik Olin Wright's treatment of class, and it is likely that they intend the manual/non-manual distinction to correspond to Wright's distinction based on skill assets.

Secondly, recent general elections have deepened the geographic and regional fragmentation of the political map. It is now difficult to find a common two-party pattern of electoral competition throughout Britain. Indeed, British political scientists now observe *two* two-party systems: Conservative-Labour opposition dominates contests in English urban and northern seats, and Conservative-center party competition dominates England's rural and southern seats. In addition, Labour-national party competition dominates the Scottish contests, where the Conservatives were shut out with no seats after the 1997 election, and gained but one seat in 2001 while falling into fourth place in the popular vote, behind the Liberal Democrats.

Finally, elections since the 1970s have displayed a striking gap between two-party dominance at the parliamentary level and the tendency toward a multi-party system in terms of the votes cast. The winner-take-all electoral system preserved two-party dominance in parliamentary representation at over 90 percent of the seats through 1992. The combined Labour and Conservative tally suffered a modest decline in 1997 to 88.6 percent, and—despite the fifty-two seats won by the Liberal Democrats in 2001, the best showing by the center party since 1929—the two-party share of seats in the Commons remained dominant at 87.9 percent. The popular vote tells a different story: between 1974 and 1992 the combined share of the popular vote for Conservative and Labour averaged 75 percent (Rasmussen 1993, p. 186). The poor showing by the Conservatives in 1997 and 2001 increased the gap between votes and seats further, with the two-party share of the popular tally declining to 73.9 percent in 1997 and 72.4 percent in 2001.

The collectivist polity relied on the alternation of single-party government between two parties who held a virtual duopoly of electoral support. Each could rely in turn on relatively unified, coherent class-based constellations for electoral support. Effective public choice (albeit narrow choice) was possible because the preferences of defining class-based constituencies could be identified by positions in relation to a single policy axis (the distribution of economic rewards and the collective goods of the welfare state), and the programs of the two dominant parties could largely be plotted on that same axis. The complex destabilization of the party system weakens the central instrument of choice.

Functional Representation

In the collectivist era, party-based governments could also rely on these same constituencies for policy mobilization. However, this secondary component of public choice in the collectivist polity has been eroded in recent decades, as collective class identities and associated organizations have weakened, and government has distanced itself from traditional corporatist interest bargaining.

The rise and fall of the Social Contract engineered between the government and trade unions during the 1974–79 Labour government of Wilson and Callaghan was a critical juncture in the transition from social democracy to the politics of dissonance. The set of formal but voluntary incomes policies bargained through each of four phases, with decreasing Trades Union Congress (TUC), trade union, and rank-and-file support, began as the perfect embodiment of the collectivist polity. As a political-institutional instrument, it brought together parliamentary and functional representation in a crucial exercise of choice. It was grounded in the class system, relying for its success on the desperate gamble (as it proved to be) that when push came to shove, whatever the growing centrifugal pressures that divided parliamentary, constituency, and trade union elements in the Labour Party, a sufficiently united working class would back a Labour government. Finally, its very name—so much more evocative and lofty than "wage and price controls"—was designed to tap the foundational imagery of democratic consensus and participatory citizenship. The Social Contract took on considerable normative and cultural significance in political debates and its demise has figured centrally in the obituaries to social democracy and collectivism that have followed. Accordingly, its sorry collapse in the "winter of discontent" marks a critical juncture in British political development.

Since the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, governments have held class-based interests more at arms length. Trade unions, in particular, were targeted during the Thatcher governments—the object of a series of measures to weaken their power and curb their activities (Grant 1989, pp. 10–21). A formidable combination of legislated constraints on union rights, showcase defeats of trade unions, and high unemployment (particularly in the traditionally unionized manufacturing sectors) helped crystallize a continuing pattern of decline in union membership, militancy, and power.

During the period of Thatcher's premiership, unions lost some four million members and union density fell from 53 percent to 39 percent. By 1998, only 31 percent of males and 29 percent of females in all occupations were union members. Only women in "professional" (at 62 percent) or "associate professional and technical" occupations (at 54 percent) reflect a union density over 50 percent. No occupational categories exhibit more than 40 percent union membership for male employees (Office for National Statistics 2000, pp. 78–79). Moreover, significant sectoral shifts in union membership and density (by the mid-nineties, union density in the public sector was nearly three times that of the private sector, and membership in the manufacturing sector had declined significantly) helped change the attitudes and behavior of unions (Kessler and Bayliss 1995, pp. 34, 158). In fact, traditional industrial unions who fight by the old rules, challenging management prerogative every step of the way, have seen their influence decline with the rise of *market-based unions* in the more competitive high technology sectors, which tend to accept no strike clauses, management flexibility in the assignment of work and shifts, and binding arbitration (McIllroy 1988, pp. 189–235). At the same time, the militancy of public sector unions has been reduced, most visibly with the virtual elimination of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the declining membership and capacity of unions in other formerly nationalized industries. More quietly, union militancy in the public sector has abated with decentralization (e.g., in the Civil Service) and expansion of review body procedures (as distinct from collective bargaining) to determine pay for school teachers, nurses, and others (Kessler and Bayliss 1995, pp. 218–21, 272–74).

One might add that for a host of reasons, it is hard to envision any return to labor inclusion in corporatist schemes of functional representation. The reasons include fragmentation within the union movement and reduced union density, and the increasing significance of sectors which are non-unionized, not engaged in collective bargaining, or represented by market-based unions. Hence, it is not clear with whom government and industry would bargain over national policy, or why they should since the unions could not deliver reliable or extensive support. Add to this the memory of resentments directed at the unions for holding the country ransom in the 1970s, the Thatcherite legacy, the debacle of the Social Contract, and the electoral calculation of Labour since Kinnock to distance the party from its trade-union heritage. It is hard to see unions ever playing again the public choice role they played in the collectivist polity. On the contrary, it seems far more likely that unions will increasingly focus their efforts on protecting and improving the legal rights of *individual* members as a substitute for their loss of *collective* power through wage bargaining and the recourse to industrial action (Kessler and Bayliss 1995, p. 293).

Nor was the ownership side of industry, despite providing much of the constituency-level leadership of the Conservative Party, able to organize and represent its interests as effectively as one might suppose under the conservative governments of Thatcher and Major. After very public criticisms of Thatcher's economic management early in her premiership, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) quickly lowered its profile. In general, Thatcher remained aloof from interest pleading, and the role of interest organizations like the CBI diminished in favor of institutions like the Institute of Directors that more closely mirrored Thatcher's policy convictions (Judge 1990, pp. 33–34). As a result, producer groups like the CBI, which traditionally operated upon the executive, developed closer relations with parliament (Rush 1990), a pattern that endured under Major.

New Labour's much vaunted commitment to business partnerships consecrates its break with traditional Labourism, but only continues a pattern of declining corporatist representation. The representative role of producer groups in the choice mechanism, which was always subject to exaggeration, has very substantially lessened and the political-cultural significance of functional representation has been substantially reduced.

National Sovereignty

Finally, I think it important to add that the choice mechanism of collectivist politics presupposed another constituent element: a taken-for-granted assumption of sovereignty, understood as effective governmental or state control over policymaking processes and a reasonable purchase on outcomes. In effect, the

Westminster model was nestled within an interstate system that has been called the *Westphalian model* (referring to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 that ended the German phase of the Thirty Years War). The model assumes a world of autonomous sovereign states, operating by national interest, with diplomatic relations and recourse to force, but with minimal cooperation (Held 1995, pp. 77–83). Even as modified by participation in international organizations such as the United Nations, the model does not accommodate the growing challenges to sovereignty flowing from economic interdependence and the growing significance of the European Union.

Because autonomous control over policy was taken for granted, this important threshold condition warranted little or no discussion in analysis of the collectivist polity or social democracy more broadly. However, recent years have witnessed the increased political and political-cultural salience of the globalization and regionalization of economic affairs. The increased significance of the European Union's role in trade, macroeconomic, and monetary policy and its potential (post-Maastricht, post-Kosovo) participation in foreign policy and security matters (not to mention the issue areas of the Social Charter) present important challenges to any principle of effective national policy control. The ongoing challenges in UK-EU relations have overshadowed the fierce distributional politics, the hard-edged class politics of Conservative Britain. The torturous saga of economic and monetary union involving Britain's spectacular departure from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in the debacle of Black Wednesday (September 16, 1992), and the all-encompassing challenges EU policy has brought first to Thatcher and Major, and now to Blair, underscore the domestic political consequences of the partial externalization of policy control.

For a decade, the seemingly endless backbiting and rebellion over the Social Charter and Maastricht within the Conservative ranks kidnapped two premierships and fixated governments; they have also stayed at the center of New Labour's travails. But there is yet a deeper level of politics at play in the Maastricht intrigues. Maastricht and the underlying problems of Britain's participation in the EU with its complex (and legally superordinate) institutional arrangements present another formidable challenge to the exercise of public choice. First, by dividing parties and motivating intra-party leadership coups and assaults, participation in the EU has contributed to the weakening of party government. Because it was the governing party, and because Maastricht became a lightening rod for attacks first on Thatcher, then on Major, it became painfully obvious that the Conservative party was deeply split over Europe. Now wandering in the political wilderness, Conservatives remain divided on Europe and unable to gain political traction by mobilizing against the euro. But so, too, is Labour divided over EU policy. A section of party supporters and as many as one hundred MPs oppose critical elements in the program (notably the creation of an independent European central bank on the Bundesbank model). Maastricht offends them for what they consider its emphatic neo-liberal, pro-business approach, its preoccupation with the formation of a European trading bloc. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, his Chancellor of the Exchequer, have maintained a wary antagonism over the timing of a public referendum on British entry into the common European currency, a process likely to bedevil New Labour well into its second government.

To the extent that divisions over the European Union fundamentally reshape British politics and party competition, they displace traditional class-distributional politics as the central organizing principle. The post-Maastricht agenda for increased economic and monetary union fundamentally influences Britain's ability to compete internationally and sustain its own model of economic development. It has significant consequences, therefore, for standards of living and on distributional politics at home. Mastering intra-EU diplomacy and policymaking has become an important litmus test of a party's and a government's credibility and electability, as the ability to govern the economy and mobilize the support of unions and business was in the social-democratic polity.

Insofar as the EU impinges significantly on national sovereign control over policy, the underlying theory of parliamentary representation is jeopardized, as is the capacity of the government to govern by striking bargains with the representatives of labor and capital. To the extent that exchange rates or social policy are determined in Brussels, then why should business or labor exert their energies in Whitehall or Westminster? As parties remain internally divided over EU policy, the principles of party government are further weakened.

Taken together, the volatility of party competition, the breakdown of functional representation, and the challenges of supranational policy determination mark the erosion of the choice mechanism of the collectivist polity and the significant erosion of the authority and legitimacy of government.

The Class System and the Civic Culture

In *Britain Against Itself*, Beer evocatively captures the transformations in the social and cultural foundations of the collectivist polity visible at the close of the 1970s. On the one hand, the party system (and its adjunct mechanisms of functional representation and mobilization) suffer dealignment in terms of partisan class-based loyalties. On the other hand, the civic culture "collapses" (Beer 1982, p. 119) amidst a massive decline of trust and acceptance of authority, as the technocratic impulse of government and the radically democratic yearnings of the new populism, spawned by the "romantic revolt" of the 1960s, clash irreconcilably. How have the class system and the civic culture changed since the 1970s?

Core Developments

In the intervening years, the processes of class *dealignment* operating on the party system have deepened and a degree of class *decomposition*—not simply in partisan support and party identification but at the level of production and class formation—has further blunted the political significance of class. Thus, there is a firm objective basis for the declining significance of class: the reduction of manufacturing work force associated with deindustrialization, the declining ratio of employment in high union density occupations, the expansion of the service sector, the growth of part-time workers, increased labor market participation by women in non-standard forms of employment, and so forth. All these processes, taken together, fragment class into a coterie of working people, differentiated by conditions of employment in a variety of dimensions. Class had anchored the political system; the decomposition of class cut the political system adrift and invited crucial political-cultural shift.

Keynesianism by the late 1970s was everywhere in retreat and with it the class compromise-welfarist ethic and social democratic polity it had intellectually legitimated throughout the postwar period. Not simply "monetarism" or the "social market economy" were at issue, nor electoral politics in the narrow sense, but a conception of how social and political life was to be interpreted, "a powerful means of translating economic doctrine into the language of experience, moral imperative and common sense, thus providing ... an alternative *ethic*" (Hall 1992, p. 47). The shift in paradigms from Keynesianism to monetarism and from collectivism to the enterprise culture represented a significant shift in the political culture.

New Dynamics

With the processes of class decomposition and the broad transformations in the civic culture, the inner core of collectivism continued to erode. At the same time a broader fragmentation and general decomposition of collective identities associated with the dynamics of "high" modernity took their toll. Two political-cultural preoccupations (to be discussed in turn) helped provoke the shift from collectivism to dissonance: consumption politics (which tended to disaggregate collective identities) and questions about national identity (which destabilized the identity that once seemed the most secure).

Consumption Politics

The claims of consumption-sector theorists were often overblown (Krieger 1992), but to whatever degree consumption politics has political influence, it helps advance a process in which more transitory, disassociated, individual preferences displace the more enduring constellations of class-based or other group politics and collective agency. Particularly in the 1980s, consumption politics assumed an important role in eroding the collectivist ideals and transforming the civic culture because, like monetarism in economic policy, it seemed to translate political-electoral behavior into the language of experience. Moreover, it hastened not just partisan dealignment but the disaggregation of collectivity.

On its face, the leap from Thatcher's oft-repeated message that all collective identities, class and otherwise, are meaningless (only individuals and families are real) to consumption-based politics is small. Both in terms of identity and material advantages, it was argued, distinctions based on patterns of consumption rather than class position increasingly influenced political behavior (Saunders 1986). Although differing quite significantly in their specific formulations, adherents of the consumption sector approach tended to link political behavior to an individual's reliance on private or public resources most decisively in the satisfaction of housing needs, but also in the use of a car, access to an old-age home, medical care, and schooling (Dunleavy and Husbands 1985). It was widely argued that at the height of consumption influences on political behavior in the 1983 general election, housing tenure was either a stronger influence on voting than occupational class or, at the least, nearly matched class as the basis of partisanship (Crewe 1992, pp. 33–36).

Ironically, the *premodernist* Thatcherite reduction of the collectivity to an aggregation of individuals and the *postmodernist* challenges to the coherence and unity of class identity—amidst the cacophony of competing and overlapping identity claims—unwittingly contributed to a common effect. The loss of collective initiative may follow from the secure autonomous voice of Thatcherite self-interest or it may emerge from the postmodern fragmentation of political purpose in an actor who is divided or paralyzed by warring identities. Either way, the ideal foundations of the collectivist civic culture are damaged when the tacit commitment by individuals to bargain for advantage within a model of interest group pluralism is withdrawn and the participant-rationalist model of citizenship challenged.

Political Community: Imagined and Confused

In the end, even the most elementary axioms of the civic culture have been destabilized. Just as national sovereign control over policy processes and outcomes was an unquestioned precondition for secure public choice, the taken-for-granted assumption of national identity may be seen as an elemental precondition for the collectivist polity in the political-cultural domain. This, too, is now in doubt—and the sheer range and vigor of the questions raised and their visibility in popular political analysis have themselves become a cultural force.

As Benedict Anderson has observed, national identity involves the belief in an "imagined community" of belonging, shared fates, and affinities among millions of people who do not know each other—and who actually lead quite different and wholly unconnected lives (Anderson 1991). As the name *United Kingdom* emphasizes, a leap of imagination is necessary to construct a unified national identity. The interactive effects of several challenges and disorienting developments have fostered a preoccupation with national identity/identities. These include: immigration and nationality legislation culminating in the British Nationality Act (1981), the demonstration effects of the post-1989 dissolution of multi-national states such as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the pressures for Europeanization associated with 1992, Maastricht, and the EMU, a growing awareness of the "multi-cultural" and "multi-ethnic" foundations and narratives of British history and society, and pressures for constitutional reform including more "home rule" for Scotland and Wales and the seemingly endless alternation of negotiation, political violence, and stalemate that keep the question of Northern Ireland's relationship to the United Kingdom unsettled.

J. G. A. Pocock, who helped launch the historiographical debate, asks what becomes of the definition of national community and "the identity it offers the individual" when sovereignty is "modified, fragmented or abandoned" as it was with Britain's participation in the European Union (Pocock 1992, p. 364). Hugh

Kearney questions whether the United Kingdom as a political unit comprises four nations or one, and he tries to slide past the conundrum by emphasizing the “multi-cultural” as distinct from the “multi-national” history of Britain (Kearney 1991, pp. 1–6). Stuart Hall notes that in defining themselves, UK residents say they are “English or Welsh or Indian or Pakistani” (Hall 1992, p. 291). Britishness is lost in the assertion of self-identity. “The sense of identity of the English is almost as difficult to specify as the name of the state,” observes Bernard Crick (1991, p. 91), extending Hall’s argument. He then explains that “British” is a concept appropriately applied to matters of citizenship and political institutions and emphasizes, “It is not a cultural term, nor does it apply to any real sense of nation” (Crick 1991, p. 97).

As Crick observes, for the English it is easy to mistake patriotism for nationalism (a “Britishness” transposed into and experienced as English nationalism). But it is important to add that this is a confusion to which ethnic minorities are not prone, especially given the complex interplay between nation and race (another imaginary source of community) in rhetorical definitions of Englishness/Britishness. A quite potent blurring of lineage, race, and nationality extends from the mid-seventeenth century historiography of the Norman invasion in 1066 (foreigners oppressing the “Anglo-Saxon race”) through Margaret Thatcher’s 1982 justification for war against Argentina (“The people of the Falkland Islands, like the people of the United Kingdom, are an island race”) (Miles 1987, pp. 24–43). To ethnic minority communities, the patriotic appeals during the Falklands War to a truly imaginary community 8000 miles away emphasized the exclusion felt by minority communities right in the heart of England (Gilroy 1991, p. 51). As one observer noted in the popular press at the time, “Most Britons identify more easily with those of the same stock 8000 miles away . . . than they do with West Indian or Asian immigrants living next door” (Gilroy 1991, p. 52). Thus, one way of imagining the national community appears to privilege *race* (the assertion of common “stock” or ancestry) over *place* (who actually lives in the UK, ethnic identity aside) (Goulbourne 1991, Jackson and Penrose 1994).

Questions about fragmented sovereignty within the context of the European Union, the commingled historiography of four nations, and the interplay of race and nationality in post-imperial Britain have created doubts about British identity. The debate that erupted over the Runneymede Trust report on the *Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (Parekh/The Runnymede Trust 2000) illustrates how volatile questions about what constitues “Britishness” have become in the UK today. To the extent that this observation is valid, yet another constituent principle of the civic culture, and a very elemental one which may be an important precondition for the others, has been lost. Collectivism without an abiding sense of shared collective history and destiny would seem impossible.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the end, as Beer observed, the collectivist polity in Britain generated political contradictions in the 1960s and 1970s that occasioned its failure by eroding the foundations located in the choice mechanism, the class system, and the civic culture. In the 1980s failure led to disintegration. In time, collectivism/social democracy was destroyed, I have argued, by a combination of factors not all of its own making, since they were in part associated with deep cultural transformations. The dynamics of "high modernity"—a transitional epoch—have put into play a set of attitudes and mainly negative expectations that have contributed to the demise of a model of government and a project that characterized the collectivist/social democratic era in politics. In that sense, if no other, we have to confront a "post"-modernist politics, since collectivism (as social democracy more generally) was a quintessential modernist project, as Beer's study explains and the preferred title for his work, *Modern British Politics*, affirms.

A choice mechanism already overloaded by the increasingly fractious demands of producer groups no longer constrained by party loyalties grew increasingly inadequate as the party system was dealigned and destabilized in new dimensions. Functional representation collapsed, and the painful intrigues of UK-EU relations (an externality to the collectivist polity) magnified the constraints on national sovereignty. The institutional basis for public choice—party system and corporatist arrangements—and the motivations for actors in and out of government to bargain with each other were irretrievably weakened. As the force and coherence of class-based politics abated, a cacophony of political identities fragmented the civic culture and colluded unwittingly with Thatcherite assaults on traditions of social solidarity. The crucial processes of aggregation and consensus building that secured the collectivist polity were sharply arrested. The social and political-cultural landscape was altered in fundamental ways, but the choice mechanism remained fixated in a two-party dominant system, defined by class, with no space for the formal expression of alternative identities and interests.

What is the status of the claims made here and what are the implications?

First, it is worth clarifying what is and is not being claimed about the British case. Is collectivism dead? Not entirely, but in a form that animates politics, collectivism appears spent. Although the tendencies described in this article may obscure, they do not completely eclipse the values and sentiments that secured the collectivist/social democratic polity. Culture remains a struggle and a debate, with innumerable voices engaged on the margin and at the center. Many attributes of Britain's pragmatic consensus-building civic culture endure, but less coherently and no longer without dissonant echoes. New Labour's appeal to the pragmatic politics of the center should not be confused with collectivism, since politics today lacks both the mobilizing instruments and the all-encompassing goals of the previous epoch. As I have argued elsewhere, by opting for a middle-down aggregation of voters rather than a grounded interest-based coalition, New Labour's Third Way lies outside the boundaries of collectivism and a range of alternative social-democratic models (Krieger 1999). The prospects seem dim for the re-emergence of effective mechanisms for social choice, the formation of a consensus-driven mass politics, and the renewal of unified or coherent political identities to anchor a political system. In particular, the foundational security of class and nation seem irretrievably lost and the mismatch between interests or conditions of life and institutions of representation appears irremediable.

A parallel argument is offered regarding class politics. For both objective reasons (the decomposition of "the working class") and subjective reasons (the behavior of the unions and the Labour Party and their heterodox ideological postures) class politics no longer provide the unifying experience for constructing collective identities, nor the legitimating motif for a model of governance, nor a unitary or exclusive inspiration for solidaristic collective identities. I have argued that the sorting of laboring experiences and conditions by gender, race, and ethnicity contributed to the growing salience of other collective political identities. These were given new force by the dynamics of high modernity that encourages skepticism about grand narratives (including those associated with social democracy) and prompts individuals and groups to explore more broadly alternative meanings and interpretive motifs in politics, as in social life.

Secondly, although this article takes up only the British case, it should not be inferred from this that I am offering a "peculiarities of the English" exercise. On the contrary, I hope this effort inspires serious reflection about comparative applications. The British case involved a shallower social-democracy in terms of corporatist interest intermediation, solidaristic strategies by the representatives of labor, and social policy orientations than many European alternatives. And yet British collectivism presented a coherent model, securely anchored in both cultural and institutional terms, and benefiting from a well-articulated symbiosis between party system and social class foundation. It's demise, I want to suggest, illustrates the systemic demise of European social democracy, although a substantial treatment of this broader dynamic goes well beyond the terms of this exercise.

Nevertheless, to hint at directions for research, Britain is far from the only case where the wheels have come off a collectivist or social-democratic model and where one can see important signs of the emergence of what I have termed a politics of dissonance. The complicating domestic repercussions of European integration highlights this point. Nearly everywhere among the EU countries the Maastricht treaty ratification process and the struggle to meet the very exacting EMU convergence criteria exacerbated tensions over national identity and sovereignty. Moreover, the ratification process reconstituted political fault lines and revealed the growing mismatch between the social bases of politics and the traditional party system. In France, for example, the "petit oui"—51 percent for, 49 percent against—that saved Maastricht demonstrated that the emerging EU-inspired divide between "haves" and "have-nots" is not constituted in traditional class terms. Rather, as elsewhere in Europe, the solidly employed, especially those working class voters in regions and sectors likely to benefit from integration, joined the highly educated and wealthy in the "yes" vote, while workers in declining industrial areas and the degraded working-class suburbs, farmers who benefited from the CAP, and many lower level white-collar and self-employed who felt marginalized, joined in opposition (Kesselman 1997, pp. 149–50, 227–30; Ross 1997, p. 632). That the Maastricht vote in France pitted the Socialist government and the two traditional center-right parties against only the National Front (FN) and the Communist Party (PCF), and that the "big three" could only muster a razor-edge victory, speaks to the increased divide between interests and parties that institutionally frames the politics of dissonance. In addition, it indicates a notable weakening of government authority and legitimacy, a tendency that was shockingly evident most recently in Ireland's rejection of the Nice Treaty in June, 2001.

What is more, the macroeconomic and social policy orientations mandated by the EMU Stability and Growth Pact—deficits below 3 percent of GDP, inflation rates no more than 1.5 percent greater than the average of the three members with the lowest rates, and so forth—play havoc with the postwar settlement distributional bargains underlying social democratic politics. The neo-liberal, market-driven agenda for deepening European integration nullifies the full-employment Keynesian welfare-state policy regime. Social democratic parties in name or provenance will continue to take their turn as governing parties, but they will not be pursuing collectivist/social democratic policy agendas.

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