

Post-Modernism and the Silent Revolution

by Marc Glendenning

IN THE AFTERMATH of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dominant view in the West was that liberal democracy had won a decisive, final victory. According to Francis Fukuyama we were witnessing the 'end of history'. No illiberal ideology, including militant Islam, he argued, would from now on be capable of seriously threatening representative government.¹

This view should now be seen as dangerously complacent. We are experiencing the emergence of what can be described as *Post-Modern Authoritarianism* (PMA). This description refers both to an empirically observable condition – the way in which the institutions of modernist parliamentary democracy are being hollowed out through the transfer of powers to a range of unaccountable agencies – and to the ideological device that is used to advance this silent revolution. European political integration is a major component of this process, but PMA goes considerably beyond it. The anti-democratic virus has spread within the British body politic and this is why EU-critics can no longer continue to deal with the European question in isolation. The expansion of Brussels power is not a foreign conspiracy against Britain, rather it is one symptom of the way in which a large part of the domestic political class is abandoning liberal democracy, as Frank Furedi, in his important new book *The Politics of Fear*, argues.²

The intensity with which the likes of Neil Kinnock, Ken Clarke and Denis MacShane not only dismissed the significance of the 'No' votes in France and Holland but also opposed giving Europe's voters a say on the EU Constitution in the first place, is one indication of the *Counter-Enlightenment* now taking place. Andrew Duff, Liberal Democrat MEP, showed his respect for democracy with the following outburst: "*The experience [of the French and Dutch referenda] begs the question of whether it was ever appropriate to submit the EU Constitution to a lottery of uncoordinated plebiscites... The rejectionists are an odd bunch of racists, xenophobes, nationalists, communists, disappointed centre-left and generally pissed-off*".³ Chris Bryant MP, chair of the Labour Movement for Europe, thinks that, "*Although a referendum might be appropriate for 'Pop Idol' ... it is unsuitable for examining a treaty*".⁴ These responses

demonstrate a dangerous contempt for citizens outside the political class.

In contrast to earlier and more openly anti-democratic currents, the Post-Modern Authoritarians (PMAs) adopt a subtle 'passive-aggressive' strategy based upon undermining the foundations of the nation state – the only viable mechanism by which the ruling elite is held to account – whilst simultaneously denying the reality of the system they are building. The act of illusion the PMAs are seeking to pull off is to leave the physical structures of modernist democracy still standing while divesting them of actual decision-making meaning. Post-modernism is the perfect underlying framework for a duplicitous political project that cannot afford to reveal its true nature. This is because it rejects the modernist idea that ideologies can and should be based on attempts to identify connecting truths that enable something fundamental about the totality of an issue to be said. Post-modernists contend, for reasons that will be given later, that the age of the 'grand narrative' is dead and that only stories about fragments of existence can be communicated. Thus, the PMAs, like a guerrilla hit-and-run army, try to avoid direct, large-scale confrontations.

Chris Tame has observed the fascistic way in which new authoritarianism places great emphasis on the aesthetics of politics at the expense of honestly engaging with the political content of competing world-views.⁵ This leads, on the one hand, to attempts to associate the EU with pleasing cultural images and, on the other, to wage McCarthyite, black propaganda campaigns against opponents, associating them with negative attributes such as xenophobia and philistinism.

Organisationally speaking, PMA is also difficult to identify because it is not based upon a modern-era style mass visible movement. It draws together a wide network of elites across the political spectrum. It is remarkable that Czech President Vaclav Klaus is the only politician in office from across all the twenty-five member countries to oppose the EU Constitution. This political alliance is bolstered by client interests such as big business, NGOs and, of course, an army of legal activists based in law firms, like Matrix Chambers, that directly benefit from the diminution of

parliamentary politics.

The post-modern state that is taking shape has not been the product of a self-conscious ideological project. Instead, it has been the culmination of the actions undertaken by a variety of forces with different agendas over a thirty-year period. The Thatcher and Major Governments placed heavy restrictions on local democracy and were responsible for a proliferation of Quangos, which Blair has added to. Successive generations of national politicians have handed over new powers to Brussels, fully conscious of the gaping democratic deficit into which they were plunging their citizens.

The causes of the development of political post-modernity have therefore predated the emergence of a complementary ideological consciousness. But there is now evidence that post-modernism is being deliberately employed by those in the intellectual vanguard of the project to emasculate national democracy. Robert Cooper, the Director-General of Politico-Military Affairs for the Council of Ministers in Brussels, is the author of *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* in which he advocates a 'new imperialism'.⁶ In *The Third Way*, one of the high priests of New Labour, Anthony Giddens, confusingly (but predictably) contends that, "*nations will retain ... considerable governmental, economic and cultural power over their citizens*" but will nevertheless have to immerse themselves in a system of 'cosmopolitan democracy' or 'fuzzy' sovereignty.⁷ He believes that the EU provides a model of governance that should be replicated globally and that the UN International Criminal Court's jurisdiction "*should extend widely over relations between states and their citizens*".⁸ So, which powers *exactly* does Giddens think should be exercised exclusively by national democracies?

The Post-Modern State

The post-modern state has three key defining features:

FIRST, unlike modern forms of government, power is dispersed to a multiplicity of agencies. Just as modernists wanted to de-mystify the workings of the natural world through free scientific exploration, so too did Enlightenment thinkers

want to make the political process made intelligible to citizens. The locus of ultimate political authority in the modern democratic state was clear-cut and this facilitated accountability. In contrast, the system that is succeeding it is fractured (or 'fuzzy' to use Giddens' highly appropriate term). We are being subjected to a political system as opaque as its pre-modern equivalent.

- At a national level, the political class has been transferring policy making powers to Quangos, to civil servants through an expansion in the number of statutory instruments and by giving judges the effective capacity to make public policy through their subjective interpretations of human rights legislation.

- Nations are also being enmeshed in a growing number of international treaties that at any one time restrict the room for manoeuvre of elected parliaments. The UN is now beginning to develop some characteristics of global governance through the creation of the International Criminal Court.

- The last method of democratic emasculation being employed by the political class across our continent is the transfer of powers to the European Union. The vast majority of the 20,000 plus EU directives have been implemented without full parliamentary debate through the use of statutory instruments.

SECOND, what makes this multi-layered system a significant discontinuity from the modern era is that the national political elites have come together and handed over powers to a supreme law making authority *above* their own states. This has been compared by John Laughland, in relation to the EU, to the creation of a political 'cartel'.⁹ By subordinating their own countries in a growing number of policy areas to the central, collective decision-making process, the political class is effectively able to bypass local electorates.

THIRD, the way in which the post-modern institutions operate is clearly at variance with the value of the rule of law. Quangos and ministers using 'enabling' legislation often exercise powers, which there is no capacity to challenge. NATO engaged in military aggression against Yugoslavia contrary to its own charter. The UN International Criminal Court was created without a proper legal basis. EU officials, including Europol agents, have been granted immunity from criminal

prosecution. So, the post-modern era looks suspiciously like the pre-modern period in relation to the unpredictable and selective use of power.

The New Left Gets Unreal

The post-modernising of the British centre-left is a long story beyond the scope of this article. However, a quick-fire recounting needs to be attempted if the way in which New Labour seeks to advance its European policy is to be better understood.

The ideas that had gained momentum within the French left since the 1960s, based on the work of the likes of Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault and others, started to come into fashion in Britain in the 1980s as the previously socialist intelligentsia searched for an alternative theory. They needed an approach that could simultaneously lay the seeds of recovery of the left and maintain their own class position as intellectuals. Post-modernism fitted the bill because it provided a grandiose-sounding justification for ditching 'big picture', economic socialism. Post-modernism contended that all truth claims about the world were the product of subjectively derived 'texts'. The Enlightenment belief that there could be a one-to-one correspondence between representations of reality and reality itself, the basis of inductive science, was challenged. All such interpretations, it was said, were the product of the *particular* subjective perspectives of those advancing the theory. Thus, 'the signifier', the means by which reality is represented, is more important than 'the signified', the object or idea identified.

This approach chimed with the emerging feminist, environmentalist, gay and black groups that were gaining ascendancy within the Labour Party as the trades unions were losing influence. These new left tendencies argued that the way ahead was to abandon class-based politics and instead build a coalition that took into account their particular demands and experiences of oppression. It was in this era that the notion of 'group rights', later (and misleadingly re-branded as 'human rights') came to replace social democracy as the dominant left discourse.

The other great attraction of the 'anything goes' post-modernist approach for the younger generation of emerging Labour politicians was that a party free of its ideological straitjacket would be able to make whatever economic compromises were necessary to attract swing voters and big

business. This was to have implications for Labour's Europe policy. Now that pursuing a distinctively leftist programme was no longer an objective, Brussels ceased to be perceived as the threat it once was. The EU's corporatist approach – the Social Chapter *and* the Single Market – dovetailed perfectly with New Labour's *Third Way* profile. The democratic culture of the Party came to be abandoned as the Blairites, having lost whatever ideological commitments they may once have had, adopted Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. Politics was now primarily about technocratic administration, holding on to office ruthlessly and extending your party's base of patronage. Neil Kinnock's personal journey from rhetorically anti-EU leftist firebrand to European Commissioner, and now lobbyist for powerful shipping interests in Brussels, presents a marvellous metaphor for Labour's political journey over a twenty-year period.

As Peter Osborne argues in *The Rise of Political Lying*, post-modernism provided New Labour in the national context with an important tactic, crucial to its culture of 'spin' and 'triangulation'.¹⁰ While it claimed that ideologies such as Marxism or liberalism could not establish themselves on a bed of empirical truth, post-modernism asserted that they could nevertheless be 'deconstructed' by the exposure of their inner contradictions. In the European sphere, the grand narrative the PMAs wish to destroy is idea of the nation state. They seek to do this in a variety of different ways, including the assertion that independent nations lead to war (even genocide) and cannot cope with issues that transcend national borders. But, true to their passive-aggressive mindset, the PMAs refuse to articulate their own 'grand narrative', namely transnational governance. Thus, Robert Cooper, in a recent debate on Europe's future, said that there was "*no big idea*" now associated with the EU, something you cannot imagine Giscard d'Estaing, to his credit, saying.¹¹

The primary purpose then of the post-modern approach is to erect a wilderness of mirrors around the central issue of where power is located. The trick the PMAs use in the European context is simultaneously to argue that the EU must be *more* than a free trade area (otherwise how could they justify Brussels being legally supreme and having its own police force?) but that it is *less* than a state in the process of being created. The classic formula they use is to contend that

the EU is, as Giddens puts it, “pioneering forms of governance that do not fit any traditional mould”.¹² Anything to avoid the dreaded (and objectively true) ‘S’ word. In Giddens’ ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ the physical borders between nation states and the division of powers between themselves and Brussels are ‘fuzzy’. This is a classic example and a reciting of the post-modernist assertion that there are no clear and stable boundaries between different entities. Everything is in a state of flux. This, of course, is self-serving nonsense. In the objective world, hard decisions are ultimately taken by specific, authorised individuals somewhere.

New Labour’s shameless deconstruction of reality was taken to extremes when Europe Minister Peter Hain claimed that the EU Constitution was ‘a tidying up exercise’ and not really what it *itself* purported to be. With post-modernism we are in 1984 ‘Newspeak’ territory. Anything can be the opposite of what it actually is. This particular spin was described by Labour MP Rodger Godsiff as “an insult to everybody’s intelligence”.

The other great political *virtual reality* claim the PMAs make is that in the globalised world we can have ‘multiple identities’. We can simultaneously be citizens of our regions, countries, the EU and the World. It’s not a case of ‘either/or’; that’s old-fashioned dualistic thinking, apparently. Political identity is dishonestly being spun here as if it were directly analogous to one’s capacity to appreciate the contrasting joys of both, say, thrash metal and trad jazz. As members of governed societies, we have to choose where we believe *ultimate*, end of the line, political authority should lie and which is *the* political community we give our allegiance to. Music lovers don’t face such necessary choices.

The way in which the EU-based system operates at present is post-modernism made flesh because it obscures who is responsible for what. Its Byzantine quality enables it to be represented in a way that conceals its essence. As Mark Leonard of the Centre for European Reform (a Brussels financed think-tank), in a moment of rare and sublime candour puts it: “Europe’s power is easy to miss. Like an ‘invisible hand’, it operates through the shell of traditional structures. The British House of Commons, the law courts ... are still here, but they have all become agents of the European Union implementing European law. This is no accident. By creating common standards that

are implemented through national institutions, Europe can take over countries without necessarily becoming a target for hostility ... Europe’s invisibility allows it to spread its influence... Europe lacks one leader, being a network of centres of power that are united by common policies and goals.”¹³

Everything you examine about the EU lends itself to this anti-democratic quest for obscurity. Instead of the rule of law associated with classic modern nation states, many of the Articles in the Treaty are so loosely drafted that nobody really knows what their legal implications actually are until the Commission and the ECJ interpret them. Likewise, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, includes Article II-112, which permits ‘limitations’ of the preceding rights if these are ‘necessary and genuinely meet objectives of general interest’. So what, exactly, is the meaning of this Charter of ‘rights’? ‘Subsidiarity’ implies the decentralisation of power, but in reality, to quote Lord MacKenzie Stuart, a former President of the ECJ, it is “a rich and prime example of gobbledygook”¹⁴ that, like the concept of a ‘Europe of the regions’, enables, again, the political class in actuality to centralise decision-making.

Conclusion

Here are three suggestions on how to fight Post-Modern Authoritarianism:

THE FIRST necessary step is to do what the PMAs desperately want to prevent: the creation of a ‘big picture’. We must attempt to show how the various streams through which political power is being drained away eventually meet up in a big, fast-flowing post-democratic river. The various connections have to be spelt out and the entire process labelled. Clarity is always the enemy of deliberate opaqueness. Resistance to old style totalitarianism was possible because the threat could be identified, understood.

SECOND, if it is accepted that PMA is an internal, as well as an external, phenomenon, EU-critics cannot continue presenting the project of expanding Brussels power as an ‘alien plot’. We must stop analysing the European issue through the prism of nationality. There is no ‘magnificent Westminster model’ to defend against ‘the scheming Europeans’. Our real struggle is against a pan-European political class that has a distinct set of interests from those of the citizens of all the Member States.¹⁵

THIRD, and closely related, EU-critics need therefore to go beyond seeking a decentralisation of power from Brussels and placing limitations on the UN. Douglas Smith has put forward the idea that mechanisms such as ‘citizens initiatives’, whereby voters can force referenda and take control of the agenda (based on the Swiss model), must be explored as a means of breaking the power of the PMAs within the context of the nation state.¹⁶ As was seen in the case of the EU Constitution, referenda are now to the political class what crucifixes are to vampires. They provide searing moments of political truth that cannot be deconstructed away, even by post-modernists.

- 1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, 1992.
- 2 Frank Furedi, *The Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*, Continuum Press, 2005.
- 3 Andrew Duff, MEP, quoted in *Liberator*, Issue 303, July 11, 2005.
- 4 Chris Bryant, MP, quoted in *The Sun*, November 13, 2003.
- 5 Chris Tame, personal interview, London November 10, 2005.
- 6 Robert Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order*, Demos, 2000.
- 7 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way and the Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity, 1998, p 32.
- 8 Anthony Giddens, *ibid*, p 146.
- 9 John Laughland, *The EU and the Problems of Democracy: the potential consequences of the Nice Treaty*, Prepisy Prednasek, 22 January 2002.
- 10 Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, Free Press, 2005.
- 11 Robert Cooper, comment in debate, *Europe: Where is the Big Idea?*, Institute of Ideas, October 30, 2005
- 12 Anthony Giddens, *op cit*, p 142.
- 13 Mark Leonard, *Europe’s Transformative Power*, Centre for European Reform, Bulletin 40, February/March 2005.
- 14 Lord Mackenzie Stuart, quoted in *Aiming for the Heart of Europe: A Misguided Venture*, Bruges Group Paper No. 33, 2003.
- 15 Sean Gabb, presentation, *The Cultural Revolution: Culture War*, Libertarian Alliance International conference, 20 November 2005.
- 16 Douglas Smith, *Direct Democracy*, The Ecologist, July/August, 2004.

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