Adrian Williamson. *Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain.* Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019. 380 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-443-7.

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Social Democracy in Britain

Quite predictably, the outcome of the 2016 United Kingdom referendum has sparked a flurry of interest in the historical backdrop of Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU). In their effort to pin down the causes of an event that—rightly or wrongly—has been widely perceived as a watershed moment in the relationship between the United Kingdom and Continental Europe, scholars have come up with a variety of explanations based on different combinations of structural and contingent factors. Many would probably agree that Brexit was neither foreordained nor a mere accident of history: while there is some truth in the claim that the decision to call a referendum on EU membership proved to be "David Cameron's great miscalculation," any thoughtful account of Britain's departure from the EU must dig deeper into the sources of British Euroscepticism.[1] After all, one does not have to endorse a teleological view of history to maintain that—whatever key political players did in 2016—"Britain's singular macropolitical economy" substantially increased the "degree of probability that the denouement of Britain's membership of the EU would be reached under the conditions of the Conservative party being in office" or that several developments occurring both in the UK and within the EU since the Maastricht Treaty made Brexit "an accident wait-

ing to happen."[2] If anything, history can help us discern between long-term trends and happenstances. Sometimes, as William Shakespeare famously put it, what's past is prologue.

Adrian Williamson's *Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain: From Attlee to Brexit* is a valuable addition to an already rich body of literature seeking to connect the 2016 vote to the domestic political transformations that took place in Britain since the 1970s, most notably the shift from consensus politics to Thatcherism. In a nutshell, the book contends that the erosion of the social democratic center of British politics undercut the appeal of EU membership, exacerbating social fractures and divisions that created the perfect conditions for millions of Britons to vote Leave in June 2016. While rejecting any deterministic interpretation narrowly based on socioeconomic drivers, Williamson successfully brings political parties as well as intraparty rivalries to the fore of the Brexit story, reminding readers of how important political elites have been in shoring up (but also in undermining) popular support for European integration in Britain.

According to Williamson, from the end of the Second World War until the late 1970s, a succession of British governments pursued an array of

"social democratic" policies, including "an explicit commitment to full employment as a central goal of macro-economic strategy; egalitarian and redistributive approaches to taxation and public spending; strong trade unions, with a substantial role in both industrial and political affairs; a mixed economy, with utilities held in public ownership; comprehensive education; the welfare state; and a substantial public rented housing sector" (pp. 4-5). Politicians who favored this policy mix within the Labour as well as the Tory Party not only gained the upper hand against advocates of full socialism on the one hand and free-market fundamentalists on the other but also strove to align Britain with the rest of the Continent by applying to the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community (EEC), for membership. Williamson maintains that figures like Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath, and Roy Jenkins agreed that "the UK was to embark with the Europeans upon a joint venture, with a significant social component" for they "saw no contradiction between their support for that [social democratic] state domestically and the need to achieve further integration with the EEC" (pp. 61, 92). Dissident voices, like those of Tony Benn on the left or Enoch Powell on the right, were pushed to the fringes by "the custodians of the post-war accommodation between the political parties," who happened to be also "the guardians of the UK's proposed accommodation with the EEC" (p. 122).

Things began to change in the aftermath of the 1975 referendum, when stagflation and fears of a free-fall decline paved the way to a Conservative Party government fixed on dismantling the "social democratic" compromise while the leadership of the Labour Party fell into the hands of the previously marginal hard left. Even though Williamson underscores Margaret Thatcher's early pragmatic, albeit unenthusiastic, attitude toward the EEC and concedes that her second government marked "an era in which the UK's involvement with Europe became steadily deeper," he also claims that her unflinchingly anti-statist and anti-socialist convic-

tions put her on a collision course with the EEC Commission president and proponent of Social Europe Jacques Delors (p. 169). Meanwhile, by 1983 British social democracy was "in headlong retreat" as his most unrepentant center-left supporters broke with Labour and coalesced, without much electoral success, into the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (p. 162).

The final chapters of the book document how Conservatives, under the spur of their backbenchers, became increasingly hostile to EU membership throughout the 1990s, whereas, under Neil Gordon Kinnock and Tony Blair, the Labour Party reconverted to Europeanism, even though in a somewhat shallow and half-hearted form. Williamson believes that New Labour cabinets "pursued policies that left the UK once more on the periphery of a Europe with whose social democratic instincts they felt little sympathy" (p. 232). This went hand in hand with a domestic agenda that did little to overturn the legacy of the Iron Lady: during the Blair era, "there were strong continuities with Thatcherism and equally stark departures from what previous Labour (and some Tory) governments had attempted to achieve" (p. 225). As the SDP eventually dissolved into the increasingly market-friendly Liberal Democrats, social democracy ceased to play any meaningful role in British politics. When the 2008 financial crisis broke out, this vacuum—which Gordon Brown's latter-day neo-Keynesian turn fell short of addressing—enabled the Coalition government to pass unusually severe austerity measures from 2010 onward and socialist, Eurosceptic hardliners managed to seize the Labour leadership once again. As the referendum came, the balance of forces proved to be overwhelming: "without the stoutly social democratic framework that had brought the UK into Europe in 1973, and kept it there in 1975, the pro-European case simply lacked sufficient robustness to fight off the nationalist forces ranged against it" (pp. 237-38).

Williamson's main argument is clear and generally well deployed, but specific sections of the book are quite unpersuasive. In the context of a contribution for H-Socialisms, three seem especially significant to me. The first—despite Clement Attlee being cited in the book's title—is the lack of attention paid to the first postwar Labour government's record about European cooperation, and supranational integration more specifically. If, as Williamson writes, British pro-Europeans in the 1970s sat on a "comfortable three-legged stool" composed of "domestic social democracy, EEC membership and enthusiasm for the continental political model," one is left wondering why the very leaders who laid the foundations of the modern British welfare state not only declined the invitation to join the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950 but also went on to denounce supranational integration as both anti-democratic and anti-socialist (p. 83).[3] Overall, Williamson seems to underestimate the powerful strand of nationalism underpinning Labour's European policy from the mid-1940s up to the 1960s as well as the intimate connection between the party's economic agenda and what David Edgerton has recently described as the "nationalisation of the post-war economy."[4] While this may have had no direct role in bringing about Brexit, it should be acknowledged that "social democratic" (in other words, centrist) Labourites were by no means naturally inclined toward *supranational* integration or European federalism, and that, in the long run, their views may have been even more than influential than those of the quixotic Labour left in providing intellectual ballast to the contemporary Eurosceptic movement.[5]

The second weakness of the book lies in the too close identification of the EEC/EU with the principles and practices of the mixed economy. Although the European Communities were meant to buttress the reconstruction process and facilitate the building of more generous social security systems at the national level, as Alan Milward showed in his landmark works (especially *The European*

Rescue of the Nation-State [2000]), it does not follow that European integration was *ipso facto* a "social democratic" undertaking, namely, one bent on creating supranational institutions that were supposed to be heavily interventionist, or *dirigistes*, in the economic field. In fact, many Continental pro-European politicians (mostly from the center and the center-right) envisioned integration as a convenient tool to institutionalize free trade among member states, thus restraining collectivist tendencies at home while accepting controlled liberalization, that is, a gradual, step-by-step opening of once-protected national markets in order to stimulate domestic growth.[6] Furthermore, it must be stressed that EEC/EU policies—especially on monetary and fiscal issues—have been hardly immune from the widespread resurgence of neoliberal, deregulatory, and anti-statist ideas since the 1970s-80s.[7] Whether today's EU is still committed to an egalitarian social and economic model in line with the one Continental European countries sought to establish and uphold during the *Trente Glorieuses* is a complex and controversial issue, one that Williamson could have examined in greater detail.[8]

The third problematic aspect of Williamson's thesis is that Euroscepticism is neither a purely British phenomenon nor a culture rooted in neoliberalism or radical socialism only: this fairly obvious but substantive point may have led the author to reflect more extensively on how exceptional the British case is in today's Europe. A full-fledged comparative analysis would have certainly fallen beyond the scope of a book focused on Britain. Nevertheless, arguing—as Williamson does—that the United Kingdom embraced neoliberalism while the rest of Europe did not fails to do justice to the far-reaching global trend toward market liberalization affecting, albeit to a different degree, all the EU member states, as well as the Western world more broadly, in the last forty years.[9] All in all, Williamson's approach runs the risk of exaggerating the uniqueness of the British experience, whose uneasy relationship with Con-

tinental Europe, however peculiar, bears at least some resemblance to that of the Scandinavian countries, including those that had not ditched their own "social democratic" settlement.[10]

These limitations notwithstanding, Williamson's book deserves praise for its intriguing narrative, sharp writing style, and solid structure. Unlike too much academic literature on this topic, it is accessible to the general public and offers a lucid, up-to-date synthesis of the main British parties' evolving views on European integration from which readers unfamiliar with the subject will certainly learn a great deal. Crucially, duly resisting the temptation to ascribe Brexit to what Sir Isaiah Berlin used to call "the great impersonal forces, natural and man-made, which act upon us," Williamson highlights the importance of agency and places responsibility for policy squarely on human —in fact, political—shoulders.[11] In that respect, *Europe and the Decline of Social Democracy in Britain* is right on target.

Notes

[1]. See Andrew Glencross, *Why the UK Voted for Brexit: David Cameron's Great Miscalculation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Despite being an instant book written in the aftermath of the referendum, even Glencross's account features a sketchy portrait of the British Eurosceptic movement since the 1970s (see pp. 7-20).

[2]. Helen Thompson, "Inevitability and Contingency: The Political Economy of Brexit," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 435; and Justin O. Frosini and Mark F. Gilbert, "The Brexit Car Crash: Using E. H. Carr to Explain Britain's Choice to Leave the European Union in 2016," *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 5 (2016): 775.

[3]. See, for example, *European Unity: A Statement by the National Executive Committee of the British Labour Party* (London: The Labour Party, 1950); and the more nuanced, but still firm, posi-

tion articulated by Denis Healey, "Power Politics and the Labour Party," in *New Fabian Essays*, ed. Richard H. S. Crossman (London: Turnstile Press, 1952), 161-79. On the Labour Party and the European Coal and Steel Community, see also Edmund Dell, *The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), esp. 90-109, 190-214; and R. D. Douglas, *The Labour Party, Nationalism and Internationalism, 1939-1951* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 214-65.

[4]. David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 2019), 310. As Edgerton points out, "the Labour Party presented itself to the post-war electorate in a remarkably national way. It was a nationalist as well as a social democratic party" (p. 43). Edgerton's work is likely to have a major impact on future historians set on revisiting Britain's awkward relationship with the EEC.

[5]. On the influence of Douglas Jay and Peter Shore in particular, see Mark Gilbert, "The Intellectual Origins of Brexit: Enoch Powell, Douglas Jay and the British Dissenting Tradition," in *Euroscepticisms: The Historical Roots of a Political Challenge*, ed. Daniele Pasquinucci and Mark Gilbert (Leiden: Brill 2020), 121-39.

[6]. On the free-market approach to integration, see John Gillingham, *European Integration, 1950-2003: Superstate or New Market Economy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On "controlled liberalization," see Frances M. B. Lynch, *France and the International Economy: From Vichy to the Treaty of Rome* (London: Routledge, 1997). The influence of German ordo-liberalism should not be underestimated: see, for example, Laurence Warlouzet, "The EEC/EU as an Evolving Compromise between French Dirigism and German Ordoliberalism (1957-1995)," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57, no. 1 (2019): 77-93.

[7]. See, for example, Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

Press, 1998); Kenneth Dyson and Kevin Feather-stone, *The Road To Maastricht: Negotiating Economic and Monetary Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Nicholas Jabko, *Playing the Market: A Political Strategy for Uniting Europe, 1985-2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Laurent Warlouzet, *Governing Europe in a Globalizing World: Neoliberalism and Its Alternatives following the 1973 Oil Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[8]. For two recent, thought-provoking accounts of the EU's response to the financial crisis and its implication for the so-called European Social Model, see Markus K. Brunnermeier, Harold James, and Jean-Pierre Landau, *The Euro and the Battle of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2018). Williamson observes that "the EU emerged from the [2008-9] crisis as a force for neoliberalism and financial orthodoxy" but overlooks the link between this and the policy turns of the 1970s-80s (p. 241).

[9]. For an overview, see Simon Reid-Henry, *Empire of Democracy: The Remaking of the West since the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019); and, about the EU, see Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Bo Stråth, *The Political History of European Integration: The Hypocrisy of Democracy-through-Market* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[10]. See, for example, Christine Ingebritsen, *The Nordic States and European Unity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Malin Stegmann McCallion and Alex Brianson, *Nordic States and European Integration: Awkward Partners in the North?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[11]. Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1998), 2.

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