

Blairism and reflections of Globalism as the New Ideology in Jonathan Coe's "The Closed Circle"

*Denisa Dumitrascu
The Romanian-American University*

Abstract

The present paper analyses reflections of Blairism and ideological strands of Globalism as depicted in Coe's "The Closed Circle". I shall argue that post-millennial times have brought a generalized, stabilised phase of a specific answer (or rather, non-answer) to political power at the level of the individual. In this phase, the amorphous category, referred to by Thatcher as "the people", have no awareness or intention of escaping, or opposing the hegemony of the dominant discourse.

The paper uses an interdisciplinary approach, based on Cultural Studies, to which key concepts from Sociology, (Neo) Marxist Criticism and Political Theory have been added.

Keywords

dialogic democracy, Third Way, neo-liberalism, globalism

The hereby paper converges with Manfred B. Steger's, John Schwarzmantel's and Slavoj Žižek's theories regarding ideology in contemporary times, but also with Stuart Hall's and Robert Leach's description of "Blairism".

The new generalised "ideology", connected to the contemporary economic situation, dominated by globalisation, was called by Manfred B. Steger "globalism". In his book, entitled *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (2003) Steger makes the clear distinction between "globalization" which is defined as the "social processes of intensifying global interdependence" and "globalism – an ideology that endows the concept of globalization with *neoliberal values and meanings*". [8, 94, my italics]

As Robert Leach has shown: "New Labour is sometimes perceived as quite different from the old Labour Party from which it emerged; the ideas embraced by Blair's party and government have become linked with the concept of a 'Third Way'". [6, 210].

Just as in the case of Thatcherism, there has been intensive debate over whether the "Third Way" can be considered a proper "ideology". Moreover, during Blair's office, Thatcher's intensive privatization programmes have been continued and the primacy of the market has been maintained. Ideologically speaking, critics argued that "Blair had abandoned socialism, and even social democracy, and some accused him of being Thatcher's heir". [6, 210]

Stuart Hall expressed his intuition about this course of events in 1989, in *New Times*, edited with Martin Jacques, when he prophesized that the new political context would find the Left “re-articulating” itself ideologically, to cover traditional Right-wing territory, in a more “humanised” form.

“the Left will produce, in government, a brand of New Times which in practice does not amount to much more than a slightly cleaned-up, humanised version of that of the radical Right”. [5, 16]

Coe’s novel *The Closed Circle*, the sequel of *The Rotters’ Club* (2001), seems to be an ample confirmation of Hall’s prophecy.

Benjamin Trotter, the intellectually refined teenager from *The Rotters’ Club*, who had aspirations to become a writer and who had styled himself as “the artist”, with explicit ideological implications, in the sequel works as a clerk in a bank. He is the focaliser in numerous scenes of the novel and subsequently, he reveals his brother’s (Paul) hypocrisy, which has helped him become the youngest New Labour MP under Blair’s newly appointed cabinet. Paul had been known, since adolescence, to foster right-wing sympathies, yet he did not hesitate to join the Labour party, embracing an extremely vague and diffuse rhetoric, in order to fool the constituency with illusions of return to the values of the *old consensus*. Benjamin’s analysis confirms his awareness and his political refinement. His analysis contains the intuition of an extended period of *Thatcherism* and, in this way, it is convergent with Hall’s views.

“I mean if the public ever got to hear what he really thinks – well, they’d realise. *Because most of them still believe that they’ve voted in a left-wing party. Whereas really they’ve just voted for another five years of Thatcherism. Ten years. Fifteen, even.*” [1,109, my italics]

As in Thatcherite times, the new post-millennial times offer a regression to one important aspect of proto-Marxist ideology – the “false consciousness” stand, according to which “the people” are as gullible as to accept any form of manipulation by the dominant classes. This regression seems to have become “the norm” in constructing political discourses, although this vision is officially denied, as well as anything remotely connected with Marxism. The situation seems politically unchanged, continuing both the reforms and the ideological persuasion mechanisms of Thatcherism.

As in the other novels, *The Closed Circle* uses statements made by real-life political figures (some even appear as cameos) to sustain the claims of various

characters, maintaining, in this way, the status of the novel as *historiographic metafiction*. Thus, a quotation from Gordon Brown, taken from the *Financial Times* and dated the 28th of March 2002, shows that New Labour maintains the primacy of the market and the privatization of all the domains, including what remained of health and education. The quotation is accompanied by Benjamin's comments and explanations.

“‘The Labour Party is more pro-business, pro-wealth creation, pro-competition than ever before.’ It strongly recommended that the role of private firms in the public sector be extended still further, with special emphasis on health and education.” [1, 290]

Here, however, an important specification is due. The text seems to embrace, by and large, another of Robert Leach's views, what he calls the “intermediate position”. [5, 211] While he contests, throughout his work that Old Labour has really been profoundly socialist, he defines post-millennial British realities, not so much as self-referential outcomes of isolated internal decisions, but as a consequence of an unprecedented connection with a world which has changed.

“New Labour is different not so much because Blair has betrayed his party's (always contestable) socialism, but because Britain and the world has changed. Firstly British society has changed. The old manual working class with which Labour was identified is smaller and more fragmented. New cleavages on lines of ethnicity, nationality and gender now overlay and complicate old class divisions. [6, 211, my italics]

In Coe's political fiction dealing with post-millennial times, we can certainly argue that the “old manual working classes”, so prominent in the 1970s, have completely disappeared from the text, as well as anything vaguely connected with “production”, which is bitterly looked down upon by many characters in Coe's latest novel. This, of course, does not mean they do not exist in society anymore. The Thatcherite legacy has transformed them into the unimportant and maneuverable category which falls under the vague label of “the people”, a status which Blairism, in its turn, consecrated.

The Closed Circle deals with Blairite “Third Way” neo-liberalism, yet offers plenty of evidence for the infiltration of the new ideology of “globalism”, which becomes the “norm” in Coe's latest novel *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010).

However, John Schwarzmantel is, to the best of my knowledge, the first theorist to explicitly make the connection between “globalism” and “neo-liberalism” claiming that “they can be seen as alternative labels for the same phenomenon”. [7, 39] In this context, one of the aims of the present paper is to explore how this new ideology recycles or subverts ideological elements of the liberal tradition and how the new response to such new ideology articulates itself. At the same time, I shall also analyse whether it has reached hegemonic status in Coe’s post-millennial fiction.

As usual in Coe’s socio-political fiction, it is not at random that the sequel opens through the eyes of Claire, who becomes the most indicated focaliser, as she returns to Britain after several years spent in Italy. This distance in time has the role of emphasising the ideological shock induced by a world which has changed so much during the last years, that has become unrecognisable even for natives.

Not only has the general atmosphere in the country changed dramatically, but the people’s behaviour seems to have lost its characteristic traits. What Claire finds is a globalised, depersonalized Britain, whose defining traits belong to the past, and which seems more and more similar to any other European country – in this case, one deemed traditionally very different: Italy.

Another element of change that Claire remarks is related to the new perception on what *work* should consist of, in the sense of the disappearing of production activities, at least at a visible level.

“my first impression is that there are vast numbers of people who don’t work in this city any more, in the sense of making things or selling things. All that seems to be considered rather old-fashioned. Instead, people meet, and they talk. And when they’re not meeting or talking in person, they’re usually talking on their phones, and what they’re usually talking about is an arrangement to meet.” [1, 6, italics in the original]

What she finds is a shift from a tangible, concrete reality, represented decades ago by productive activity and this new, fluid and apparently antithetic reality. This fluidity, immateriality, and complete lack of concrete co-ordinates, is the quintessence of the “New Times” and is to be found in the political discourse as well.

Claire’s findings are convergent with Anthony Giddens’s views expressed in *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (1994). According to Giddens, the evolution of the contemporary political situation has gone beyond the traditional, oppositional poles, of “left” and “right”, focusing instead on what he calls “lifestyle politics”, defined by “issues of consumption, individualism and the

private sphere which the established ideologies of the past neglected” [3, 180], ideas he elaborates on in *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998).

Another important contribution for our study of Blairism is his description of the new “post-traditional” society, Giddens’s term for contemporary (post-) Modernity, which, according to him is defined by new co-ordinates: “the idea of a post-scarcity economy; an idea of negotiated power; and finally the invocation of ‘dialogic democracy’”. [3,180] The idea is partly Foucauldian (in the sense of “negotiating” power relations in a “dialogic” democratic context), yet it brings an element of originality. In the “post-scarcity economy”, “productivity” is re-accented (to use Stuart Hall’s term) to negative meanings, as it “stands opposed to compulsiveness and to dependency, not only in work but in other areas, including personal life.” [3, 180].

While the few interventions of the omniscient author’s voice in *The Closed Circle* are definitely unfavorable to such views, they seem to be fostered by the Blairite dominant discourse throughout the novel.

Everything which Claire used to associate with the idea of “home” – Britain, and the British lifestyle– have changed, which has important social implications. Reserve and the social manners she associated with the British seem to have vanished forever, all diluted into an aggressive, generalised search for profit. The people’s social behaviour has changed dramatically, to the point in which they become unrecognisable, people have become aggressive, from the way in which they drive, to the way in which they interact with each other.

“You can take the temperature of a nation from the way it drives a car, and something has changed in Britain in the last few years. Remember I’ve been in Italy, the homeland of aggressive drivers.” [1, 11, italics in the original]

Moreover, the country seems to have lost its national and ethnical landmarks, the living proof that globalisation has affected not only the economic climate, but also the very psychological-behavioural structure of the contemporary subject/individual.

The familiar political involvement of the British from the 1970s, seems to have vanished as well, and to have reached a “post-political” or a-political stage. If we compare it to the political awareness in *The Rotters’ Club*, the description Claire finds in the *Corriere della Sera* seems to be describing a different country altogether, 20 years after, defined by an unrecognisable apathy.

“A few months ago I read an article in the Corriere della Sera which was called ‘Apathetic Britain.’ It said that now Tony Blair had been voted in

with such a huge majority, and he seemed like a nice guy and seemed to know what he was doing, people had breathed a sort of collective sigh of relief and stopped thinking about politics any more.” [1, 11, italics in the original]

Although she wishes the article to be just a stereotypical version of Britain outside, in a Latin country which wishes to distance itself, ideologically and ethnically from the image of “apathy”, unfortunately, Claire discovers that this description is founded and true. Social aggressiveness is doubled by a lack of political involvement altogether, which leads, slowly, but steadily, to a complete *depoliticization* of society. The only thing which the post-modern contemporary society can ever hope for in terms of a “collective” effort is simply the renunciation to any form of preoccupation, involvement or responsibility.

The *depoliticization* of society does not mean, automatically the “end of ideologies”. From this point of view, Coe’s fiction appears to embrace Saul Newman’s vision of *depoliticization*, which is done through the cancellation of ideological struggles over equality and community.

“It would appear that the ‘end of politics’ might already be upon us. We live in an age that proclaims itself to be ‘post-ideological’. Instead of the turbulent, violent political and ideological conflicts of the past, we have ‘rational’ policies and ‘good governance’. This is the age of *technocratic ‘post-politics’*, where the ideological struggles over equality and community simply have no place. One could argue, though, that this ‘end of ideologies’ thesis is the worst kind of ideological obfuscation – an example of ideology at its most cunning and insidious. The world of ‘post-politics’ is more mystifying than ever. While the political problem of community appears to have been solved through a *formal liberal pluralism*, this is only achieved through its *depoliticization*.” [7, 132, my italics]

As “the people” regress in terms of political awareness and the society becomes *depoliticized*, as they “stop thinking about politics any more” [1, 11], the dominant discourse wins territory by a simple “ideological struggle over image”, as Hall remarked in Blair’s case, a method used successfully by Thatcher as well. [4, 16] It is amazing for Claire to discover, after the sophisticated political arguments she and her colleagues had as teenagers in *The Rotters’ Club*, twenty years later, the majority of people appears to be easily persuaded, in recent times,

only by the image of a person who “seemed like a nice guy and seemed to know what he was doing”. [1, 11]

However, Claire knows that apparent apathy does not mean that all the negative energies, all the frustrations of a certain society have been healed. Her analysis evinces sociological depth and refinement, arguing that: “*if you scratch the surface of that apathy, I think what you find underneath is something else altogether – a terrible, seething frustration*”. [1, 11, italics in the original]

In the light of the above-mentioned competing ideological strands, and fragmentarian tendencies in society and politics depicted in *The Closed Circle*, Claire’s argument seems, at least partly, conclusive and persuasive.

Bibliography

1. Coe, Jonathan. *The Closed Circle*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
2. Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1984.
3. Giddens, Anthony. *Beyond Left and Right: the Future of Radical Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994.
4. Hall, Stuart. “Gramsci and Us”, in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso, pp. 161-173, 1988.
5. Hall, Stuart. “The Meaning of New Times”, in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds). *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. [Reprinted]. London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 116-134, 1990.
6. Leach, Robert. *Political Ideology in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
7. Newman, Saul. *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political*. London: Routledge, 2005.
8. Schwarzmantel, John (2008). *Ideology and Politics*. London: SAGE
9. Steger, Manfred B. *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University, 2003.
10. Žižek, Slavoj (ed). *Mapping ideology*. London [etc.]: Verso, 1994.