



PAUL ADDISON

War, Peace and Social Change

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I was enormously lucky to have Paul as my tutor in my final undergraduate year at Edinburgh in 1969-70. He subsequently became my guide, mentor and friend for the next fifty years. Not only did he supervise my doctoral thesis – on Lloyd George between the wars – but he secured his own supervisor, A.J.P. Taylor, as my external examiner and then fixed me up with his agent, Bruce Hunter, and his publishers, Jonathan Cape, who accepted my thesis for publication as a book on the basis of the first chapter: not something that would happen today. It is no exaggeration to say that Paul set the direction that I have followed for the rest of my life.

When I say I was lucky I mean exactly that. At the end of my third year I was all set to take as one of my two final honours courses Arthur Marwick's course on war and British society. I'm sure it would have been an excellent course. But Marwick was a very different character from Paul: though a serious scholar, he was also an aggressively hard-drinking, football-playing Scot. It is safe to say that I would not have found a lot in common with him. That summer, however, he was suddenly appointed to be the first professor of history in the fledgling Open University. It was an inspired appointment in which he was a great success. But it left Edinburgh with a gap to fill. The solution was to ask Paul, then a young lecturer of just two years standing, to bring forward at very short notice an alternative honours course to replace Marwick's: it was called something like 'British Government and the Governing Classes Between the Wars'. I don't remember that I had much choice in the matter. But as it turned out Paul's hastily-concocted course suited me down to the ground: it got me interested in the politics and personalities of the 1920s – specifically Lloyd George and F.E. Smith – and launched me, with his guidance and encouragement, on my career as a political biographer. Through all my later books I could always rely on him for stimulating suggestions and wise advice; the last time I saw him, only a few weeks before he died, we had a typically lively discussion about whether Lloyd George should have resigned on the conclusion of victory in 1918. I already miss him hugely.

As a student in Edinburgh in the late 1960s it was easy to believe that this was where the most exciting work on twentieth-century British history was being done. Three young Edinburgh-based writers were setting the pace. In 1965 Arthur Marwick had published *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, which examined the domestic experience of 1914-18 as the catalyst of social, political and economic change; and in 1968 he followed this with *Britain in the Century of Total War*, subtitled *War, Peace and Social Change, 1900-1967*, which extended the same idea to the whole century

and developed a controversial view of war as a progressive, not just a destructive, force. This came to be known as the 'Marwick thesis'. Then in 1969 Angus Calder published his epic study of the Second World War on the home front, *The People's War*, which set out to dispel a lot of the myths that had already grown up around the Blitz, rationing, the Home Guard and the self-congratulatory celebration of the war as a socially unifying melting pot.

Paul came slightly later. *The Road to 1945* was not published until 1975. But, as he put it in his Preface, he had been 'dabbling in the subject' ever since starting his doctoral research in Oxford in 1964, so he had been very much aware of Marwick's and Calder's work before he was appointed to Edinburgh in 1967, and he thanked both of them for reading his first draft. Likewise Calder in his Foreword to *The People's War* thanked Paul for 'conversations and assistance over several years of convergent work, amounting at times almost to collaboration' [CALDER : 16]. *The Road to 1945* is clearly influenced by both Calder and Marwick. How could it not be? Between the three of them it can be said they rewrote the social – as opposed to the military – history of the Second World War. But in charting the transformation of the political landscape between 1939 and 1945 Paul steered his own line between Marwick's broadly positive view of the effects of war and Calder's angry socialist revisionism. And in his two later books of social history – *Now the War is Over* (1985) and *No Turning Back* (2010) - I shall seek to show that he subtly revised and refined his position as his views developed, while retaining his distinctively balanced and humane approach.

The Marwick thesis, in a nutshell, asserted that war is the great driver of social change. Citing social theorists from Marx ('The redeeming feature of war is that it puts a nation to the test.... War passes extreme judgement on social systems that have outlived their vitality') [MARWICK (1970) : 13]. to Richard Titmuss ('The aims and content of social policy are determined – at least to a substantial extent – by how far the co-operation of the masses is essential to the successful prosecution of the war') [14], he took it for granted that Britain's twentieth-century history was largely 'a history of the rise of the working classes' and attributed this to the effect of 'the two total wars' [16]. To be fair he acknowledged that war was not the only factor, that other societies experienced the same development without the stimulus of war, and that not all the effects of the wars were progressive. But he still gave his name to the idea that war was the principal driver of social progress, concluding somewhat frivolously that 'Wars are like weddings: essentially extravagant and unnecessary, but a great stimulant in a convention-bound society' [17].

Calder by contrast took a strongly socialist line that the so-called 'People's War' was ultimately a confidence trick pulled on the heroic British people whose efforts had made the victory but were then denied the reward they had earned by the upper class which quickly reverted to normal and restored all the privileges and inherited inequality of the pre-war period. The war, he concluded, 'set off a ferment of participatory democracy' but in the end only reinforced what he called, somewhat apocalyptically, 'the forces of tyranny, pressing Britain forwards towards 1984' [CALDER : 21]. In his view the welfare state created after the war mainly benefitted the middle class, while 'the syndrome of low wages, bad housing, poor health and bad schooling would endure' [675].

Paul, writing slightly later than Marwick and Calder, steered a judicious path between the two. *The Road to 1945*, the book that made his reputation, was mainly devoted to explaining the leftward shift of political opinion during the war that resulted in Labour's unexpected victory in 1945. To this extent he was providing corroboration of the Marwick thesis. But he also showed that not as much really changed as was believed at the time (and for some years afterwards). He agreed with Calder that what the Labour government implemented after 1945 was not 'socialism' as the left understood it; but unlike Calder he did not see this as a betrayal. On the contrary he saw it as putting into practice the ideas developed between the wars by the 'progressive centre' whose leading advocates were Keynes and Beveridge – both of course Liberals. The wartime coalition, in this view, 'proved to be the greatest

reforming administration since the Liberal government of 1905-14' [*The Road to 1945* : 14] As a result of six years of conscription, air raids, rationing and an ethos of fair shares for all, 'all three parties went to the polls in 1945 committed to principles of social and economic reconstruction which their leaders had endorsed as members of the Coalition'. 'The political influence of the ration book', Paul suggested in a typically wry phrase, 'seems to me to have been greater than that of all the left-wing propaganda of the war years put together' [18]. As a result 'a massive new middle ground had arisen in politics.... When Labour swept to victory in 1945 the new consensus fell, like a branch of ripe plums, into the lap of Mr Attlee' [14].

Thus what the war brought about was not socialism but a 'patriotic compromise' between left and right which 'virtually satisfied the desire of the Labour party for social amelioration, without' – a nod to Calder – 'in any way attacking the roots of exploitation and injustice' [277].

The Road to 1945 ends with the perhaps complacent conclusion that 'We were all – almost all – Butskellites then' [278]. This was written in the early 1970s in the age of Wilson and Heath whose governments were still operating within the assumptions of Attlee's 1945 consensus as accepted and continued by the Conservative governments of the 1950s. But it was published in 1975, just as that Butskellite consensus was breaking down and politics was becoming polarised between a new left and a new right. Margaret Thatcher had just become Tory leader following Heath's defeat in the face of the miners' strike; and Bennism was taking hold of the Labour Party, embodying the left's critique that the Wilson Government had (once again) betrayed socialism. Paul's penultimate sentence recognised that a shift was in the air, but I think it is fair to say that – in common with most observers at the time – he failed to foresee the magnitude of the change that was just around the corner.

Ten years later, in 1985, he recognised this revolution in *Now The War Is Over*. This quite short book was published to accompany a BBC TV series on which he had acted as historical adviser. But in his Preface he explicitly called it a 'sequel' to *The Road to 1945* – 'an opportunity ... to revise former impressions', acknowledging that 'the past ten years have been a great education for us all' [*Now The War Is Over* : vi]. The Butskellite consensus that had seemed so secure in the early 1970s, he now wrote, had come under attack simultaneously from left and right, both blaming the post-war settlement for Britain's continued economic decline. While the new left continued to blame the betrayal of the promise of socialism, the neo-liberal right blamed the mixed economy / welfare state for undermining free enterprise. 'Both rejected the social democratic legacy inherited by the Conservatives from Labour in 1951' [vi].

Paul rejected both these critiques, while conceding that each contained some truth, 'in spite of the fallacious ideological baggage with which they are mixed up'. For his part he still unrepentantly applauded 'the heroic scale of social reconstruction and economic recovery' achieved by the Attlee Government in immensely difficult economic conditions immediately after the war. But he went on to explain why some of the hopes of the left had been disappointed:

The Labour ministers of 1945 expected ... to preside over a ...more earnest Britain of austere public purpose. They created a new and enduring State: what they did not anticipate was a new consumer society, emancipated from deference and old class ties, in which the new State would have to function. [vii]

On the one hand, middle-class resistance to the restrictions of 'socialism' – embodied in organisations like the Housewives' League – led the Labour government itself to relax of most of the controls on production and consumption imposed during the war; at the same time – and this is Paul's main point – the reality of working class aspirations was rapidly diverging from the lofty ideals of citizenship conceived by social reformers.

Written in eight short chapters corresponding to the eight episodes of the TV series, *Now The War Is Over* vividly charts the nation's recovery through demobilisation, rationing, the housing shortage, the foundation of the NHS and the implementation of the 1944 Education Act; but its underlying theme is the public's pent-up rediscovery of leisure expressed in dancing, the cinema, sport, jazz and Butlin's holidays, culminating in the 1951 Festival of Britain which in his final chapter Paul saw as pointing forward to the new consumer society that would emerge in the 1950s.

A smattering of adult education and elevating purpose was included in the Festival. But in the main it was a visual romp... an exercise in cultural patriotism accompanied by bread and circuses... In some ways it was another paternalistic exercise in educating the masses and elevating their taste – yet this shaded easily into advance propaganda for a colour supplement way of life. [206-209]

The high-minded moralists – Paul cites Orwell, J.B. Priestley and G.D.H. Cole – deplored this public hedonism. ('G.D.H.Cole was a gloomy old soul') [205]. Both Attlee and Nye Bevan, in their different ways, had looked forward to a society culturally and morally uplifted by collectivism. They were unprepared for the discovery that all people wanted to do when rationing was lifted was to enjoy themselves. As early as 1949 Bevan was lamenting pompously that 'Our people have achieved a material prosperity in excess of their moral stature'.¹ In fact the unintended achievement of the welfare state was to enable the long-suffering British people to cash in on the consumer society. *Now The War Is Over* concludes with Harold Macmillan, just six years after the Festival of Britain, boasting that 'most of our people have never had it so good' [210]. The age of austerity had given way to the affluent society.

What Paul was doing in this book was further qualifying the Marwick thesis, arguing that war was not after all the great catalyst of government-directed social change embodied in reforming legislation, but that the millions of small changes wrought by the people themselves in peacetime were actually much more important. 'Then as now, it was a fiction that governments make society. Society makes governments, and unmakes them too' [vii].

That was 1985. It was to be another twenty-five years before Paul returned to social history in what turned out to be his last solo book, *No Turning Back*, published in 2010. In the interval he had been preoccupied with Churchill and military aspects of the war; but he had never stopped brooding on the way society had evolved over his lifetime, and by now his ideas had evolved again. *No Turning Back* is a more substantial scholarly book than *Now The War Is Over*, but also a more personal one. In a movingly candid Introduction he confessed to being psychologically rooted in the 1950s of his youth and disoriented by all the changes that have happened since. 'At some barely conscious level of my imagination, the England of which I was a part in the late 1950s is forever the norm, and almost everything that has happened since a puzzling deviation'. He included among the illustrations his own school photograph from 1957, with his fourteen-year old self in the front row. 'For me the photo is not only a record of my classmates but a snapshot of a conservative world on the brink of many transformations' [*Now The War Is Over* : 1].

The book bears the subtitle *The Peacetime Revolutions of Post-War Britain*, and its argument is a development over a longer timeframe of the idea – contrary to Marwick – that peace is a greater agent of change than war.

Historians used to argue that Britain was transformed in the first half of the twentieth century by the social upheavals of the two world wars. With the advantage of a longer perspective we can see

¹ Nye Bevan at the 1949 Labour party conference, Blackpool, 8 June 1949.

that the comparative peace and growing prosperity of the second half of the century were more powerful solvents of tradition than the Battle of the Somme or the Blitz. [2]

No Turning Back describes six 'revolutions': the transformation from an economy founded on manufacturing to one based on finance and services; the transformation of a predominantly working-class society into a predominantly middle-class one; the mutation of the social democratic state of the 1950s into a neo-liberal state founded on privatisation and market forces; the undermining of traditional sexual morality by the permissive society; the rise of feminism challenging the traditional division of roles between the sexes; and the transformation of a homogeneous white nation into a multiracial and multicultural Britain. Of course none of these 'revolutions' was complete. There was always a tension between the forces of conservatism and the forces of change, and Paul was careful not to exaggerate or oversimplify. Through all the changes there survived 'a certain continuity of values.... The British remained a comparatively tolerant and orderly people, and Britain one of the best countries in which to live' [3].

But *No Turning Back* too reflects its time. Writing at the very end of the Blair / Brown decade, Paul saw 'New Labour' as standing 'at the confluence of all the main economic, social and political changes that had taken place since the 1960s' [407]. Of his six 'revolutions', however, only one – the transformation of the economy through privatisation and deregulation – was deliberately directed by the Thatcher Government. The others were largely ignored or even resisted by successive governments, but happened anyway. New Labour was more at ease than the Tories with these cultural revolutions, but at the price of accepting the economic revolution. Before he blew his authority by his support for the Iraq war, 'Tony Blair embodied and articulated a post-Thatcherite settlement at home that marginalised opponents on both Left and Right' [408]:

At the core of this new social and political order lay the acceptance by virtually the entire political class of the rule of global market forces... The doctrines of economic liberalism, so passionately opposed by the Left in the 1970s and 1980s, had become the truisms and clichés of the twenty-first century... Economic liberalism, like social liberalism, had become an almost unexamined faith, accepted as one of the facts of life against which it was pointless to protest. [409-410]

In 1975 *The Road to 1945* concluded with the triumph of Butskellism. Ten years later *When The War Is Over* ended with Macmillan boasting that 'most of our people have never had it so good'. In both cases Paul was looking back to historical moments on the cusp of changes which he did not – could not – fully anticipate. In the final paragraph of *No Turning Back* he raised briefly the possibility that the financial crisis of 2008-9, requiring massive state intervention by governments around the world to save capitalism from collapse, might lead to another sea-change; but he quickly dismissed it. 'On the Left hopes were briefly raised of a revival of social democracy', but this he thought unlikely. 'Private profit and public policy were more closely allied than ever and there was, it seemed, to be no turning back' [410].

He may be right, or in the long run he may be proved wrong. He could not in 2010 have anticipated the divisive impact of Brexit or the economic shock of coronavirus, the ever more urgent climate crisis or the new cold war with China, all of which will shape the next few decades. But this is not a criticism. It is not the job of historians to foresee the future. As a grateful beneficiary of the 1944 Education Act Paul remained all his life a champion of the Attlee consensus that he first wrote about in 1975. Rejecting both the social theorising of Marwick on the one hand and the ideological commitment of Calder on the other, he held instead to a quietly optimistic view of British society rooted in empathy for the everyday lives of ordinary men and women. What he did in all his books was to reflect with exceptional clarity, perspective and gentle humour the changing assumptions of the times through which we have all lived.