

TOIL AND TROUBLE

New Labour's Puritan Agenda

By Molly Scott Cato
(author of Seven Myths about Work)*

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New Labour's obsession with work reveals a plan to impose outdated Christian ideologies on the rest of us.
Enough, says Molly Scott Cato...

It was the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who said that the more insane and irrational a proposition the more faith is required to believe it, and the more effort required to prop up that belief. He was, as the forerunner of existentialist philosophy in an era dominated by the established church, referring to the Christian doctrine. But we might make a similar critique today of the Labour government's ideology of work.

The parallel with religion is worth remembering. I am surely not the only person to recognise in the zeal with which Blair intones the virtues of work, the rhetorical intensity of the lay preacher. This should be no surprise. According to Dod's Guide to the New House of Commons several of the authors of the Labour government's forced work policy are themselves the products of strongly religious families. Gordon Brown's father was a minister of the Church of Scotland, an institution strongly influenced by the anti-pleasure doctrines of Calvin. The novelist Sir Walter Scott tells a story of a meal of plain soup Calvin enjoyed with his father. When he commented that the soup tasted good his father, a staunch Calvinist, threw some cold water into it lest he should be tempted to enjoy some pleasure of the flesh! As an intriguing aside, Calvin's doctrines were taken to Scotland by John Knox, that notorious killjoy, whose own teacher was one John Major.

John Smith, Blair's predecessor as Labour leader, was also a fervent member of the Church of Scotland. In 1993 he edited a collection of essays entitled Reclaiming The Ground: Christianity And Socialism. The book was produced by the Christian Socialist movement, which numbers many leading Labour ideologues amongst its members, most prominently Tony Blair. In his foreword to Smith's collection Blair writes:

"Christianity is a very tough religion... It is judgemental. There is right and wrong. There is good and bad. We all know this, of course, but it has become fashionable to be uncomfortable about such language. But when we look at our world today and how much needs to be done, we should not hesitate to make such judgements. And then follow them with determined action. That would be Christian Socialism."

In terms of their denomination, most of the contributors to this short but telling book are Methodists. Paul Boateng begins his essay with the statement that "The Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marxism". So it is worth noting that doctrines of Methodism were taken by EP Thompson in his classic study The Making of The English Working Class as the prototype of the disciplined worker. The creation of the punctual and punctilious workforce required by capitalist production systems was far from straightforward, as our ancestors were understandably loath to give up the many "holy

days" they enjoyed each year. This problem was solved by the invention of the ideology of work. It was the Methodists who invented the concept of the "calling": one's work-role in life, as assigned by God in some lottery that was both random and unavailable for inspection. The role of the good Christian was to work hard within whatever calling "God" had assigned, hence the following lines, typical of many Methodist hymns:

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws
Makes that and the action fine

The "clause", of course, is to perform the act in God's name. Perhaps the line about making drudgery divine is most telling in terms of Labour's attitude to work policy. It is particularly sickening to learn that the author of this simple hymn, George Herbert, was himself a wealthy aristocrat and MP for Montgomery.

According to the 17th Century theologians, to question one's position in life, particularly one's work-station, was to question God's plan, and hence blasphemous. This was the ideological justification for the creation of disciplined workers, but the weapon that was used to achieve it was fear. Success in one's allotted station was taken as a sign of being favoured by God, and so increased one's likelihood of finding a place in heaven after death. People's energy and time was to be stolen here on earth in return for a promise of eternal life. No wonder Thomas Paine wrote that:

"Of all the tyrannies that affect mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst; every other tyranny is limited to the world we live in; but this attempts to stride beyond the grave and seeks to pursue us into eternity."

The early industrial workers were faced with a stark choice: a joyless life of work or an eternity of hellfire. It is unsurprising that so many took Kierkegaard's way out and struggled to keep a faith in eternal life.

In a similar way many lives are being stolen today by an economic system which finds its own supportive ideology in the forced-work ethos of New Labour. Like the beliefs of their Protestant antecedents, Labour's apparent belief that work is a universal panacea to solve all our social and economic problems can only have its source in faith. It has no basis in either fact or experience. As Brother Tony intones from his postmodern, designer pulpit to the faithful journalists, the glint in his eye gives a clue to the messianic origin of his political project.

In fact the obsession with work pervaded Christianity for only a small part of its 2000-year history. Despite the odd desperate Biblical reference to his training as a carpenter, it is obvious that Jesus Christ himself was the prototype hippy. It was Jesus who advised his disciples to "Consider the lilies of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin". He spent most of his adult life telling stories, discussing the meaning of life, begging food from friends; and he had long hair and wore sandals.

The problem with religious commitment, however, is that it does not allow this sort of argument. We are not permitted to take issue with Tony Blair about how we would like to spend our short span here on earth, either we take up our oars on the slave-galley of the economy or we are wicked sinners to be cast into outer darkness. Like Torquemada,

enforcing belief in an insane ideology with the fire of the Inquisition, to be acceptable in New Labour Britain we must spout the litany of holy work: yes, I enjoy my job; since beings made redundant I have spent every hour on my bicycle seeking work; I don't enjoy being unemployed; I wish I could spend all my waking hours licking up toxic waste like you do (melody available on request).

The political commitment to work for all is taking on totalitarian dimensions. It is becoming almost blasphemy to suggest that we might not want to work, might not enjoy work, might rather sit on the beach and listen to the sea, or even (out come the garlic and crucifixes) prefer to stay in bed with a bottle of Bulgarian red. But New Labour ideology, like all religious ideology, is no diversity. Those who use their own energy to bolster an impossible belief cannot afford to listen to opposition. They will not enter the arena of rational debate.

If it makes Blair and his brethren feel good to work hard all day then not I would not wish to stop them. What I would challenge is their right to impose their choice on the rest of us. My own view is that most of the work that is carried out in a modern, advertising-led, consumption-based economy is both environmentally and socially destructive. Would we really rather that the uncountable unemployed all found jobs in the factories of transnational corporations making cars? Aside from the corporations' profits, who benefits from their work? Wouldn't they be better off living on a citizens' income and enjoying their lives?

If it is true that Labour's obsession with work has its roots in a 17th-century religious ideology, why should we accept it today? According to the latest edition of Social Trends only 15% of people in today's Britain are Christians. We are now a secular society: only 18% of people are now practising members of any religious group, far more have beliefs that are personal, non-institutionalised, and often heretical.

I suppose it must be an occupational hazard with politicians that they feel they can tell us how to organise our lives. The justification of their right to do this is clearly not a rational proposition: the disastrous results of state organisation of the lives of citizens lies all around us. To an extent, I felt safer with the Conservatives. At least we knew where we were with them. They were selfish, greedy, and dishonest, but you could always predict where they were going next: wherever would make a faster buck. With Tony Blair and his New Labour hosts I am not so sure, and more uneasy.

As I sit patiently at my postmodernised "work-station", watching my life tick away on the office clock, I think venomously of this crusade for jobs. And I wonder what sort of Golden Jerusalem Labour has in mind for us all.