

## Lewis Minkin and the party–unions link

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‘For over 80 years’, Minkin declares in his magisterial survey *The Contentious Alliance* (1991: xii), the Labour Party–trade unions link ‘has shaped the structure and, in various ways, the character of the British Left’. His core proposition can be encapsulated simply: trade union ‘restraint has been the central characteristic’ of the link (1991: 26). This constitutes a frontal challenge to received wisdom – endlessly repeated, recycled and amplified by Britain’s media – that, until the ‘modernisation’ of the party, initiated by Neil Kinnock and accelerated by Tony Blair, the unions ran the party. So ingrained is this wisdom in British political culture that no discussion of party–unions relations in the media can endure for long without some reference to the days when ‘the union barons controlled the party’. This view, Minkin holds, is a gross over-simplification and, to a degree, downright misleading. The relationship is infinitely more subtle and complex, and far more balanced than the conventional view allows. The task Minkin sets himself in *The Contentious Alliance* is twofold: on the one hand to explain why and how he reached that conclusion; and, on the other – the core of the book – to lay bare the inner dynamics of the party–unions connection.

What is most distinctive and enduring about Minkin’s work? In what ways has it most contributed to our understanding of the labour movement? Does it still offer insights for scholars of Labour politics? In the first section of this paper, I examine how Minkin contests the premisses underpinning the orthodox thesis of trade union ‘baronial power’; in the second, I analyse the ‘sociological’ frame of reference he devised as an analytical tool to uncover the roots and essential properties of the party–unions connection; in the third section, I address the question of the relevance of Minkin today.

### The ‘baronial power’ thesis

I call the received wisdom about party–unions relationship the thesis of ‘baronial power’. It can be stated simply. ‘In a sense not true of its social democratic counterparts on the mainland of Europe’, Marquand (1991: 25) contends, Labour, ‘has been a trade union party, created, financed and, in the last analysis, controlled by a

highly decentralised trade union movement'. The link has been widely held responsible for Labour's post-1979 long sojourn in the wilderness, because the concessions needed to rally the union leaders behind the parliamentary leadership in the 1970s were 'so substantial . . . that they helped to undermine the leader's stature and the Party's credibility' (Harrison 1996: 199). Kitschelt, in a much-cited work (1994), concludes that the Labour Party affords the closest approximation to what he calls the unions-control model. In a neat distillation of the conventional wisdom he writes that not only are they 'the major party financiers, but [they] control the Conference Arrangement Committee, which sets the agenda at national party conferences, and the bulk of the conference votes, which are cast in blocks by the leaders of individual unions'. Moreover, the unions elected a majority of the party's National Executive Committee, enjoyed a powerful role in the selection of parliamentary candidates, and sponsored a large number of MPs (1994: 251; see also Barnes and Reid 1980: 222). These organisational characteristics can surely admit to no other conclusion than that the unions will naturally 'dominate the party elite by controlling key appointments and placing their own leadership in important executive and legislative party offices' (Kitschelt 1994: 225). Yet this conclusion Minkin shows, in the most heavily researched and meticulous survey of the party-unions connection yet published, to be wrong on all counts.

*The Contentious Alliance* – building in a number of respects on Minkin's path-finding first study *The Labour Party Conference* – provides chapter and verse in explaining why it is wrong. At one level it is, like its predecessor, an indispensable source book on Labour, chronicling the history of the relationship between (what were once called) the two wings of the movement. But its purpose is much more ambitious, for it seeks to understand why established orthodoxy is wrong. This greatly extends and deepens its intellectual horizon, for Minkin is, in effect, asking a most challenging question: why do political actors – and especially those who wield power – behave as they do?

Minkin began systematically exploring the nature of the party-unions relationship in the period of the 1974–79 Labour Government (Minkin 1978a). In these years the baronial power thesis was taken for granted. Few queried the judgement that Jack Jones, head of the largest union, the TGWU, had become 'arguably the most powerful politician within the Labour Party' (Barnes and Reid 1980: 191–2), and it was generally accepted that Labour ministers exhibited a 'pervasive deference to the trade union movement' (Artis and Cobham 1991: 276).

Minkin was one of the few who dissented. In 1978 his definitive study *The Labour Party Conference* was published. Given the massive role the unions played in the party's policy machinery it was inevitable that the nature of the party-unions relationship would be one of its major concerns. Having conducted extremely detailed and exhaustive empirical research – a hallmark of the Minkin style – what struck him was the complexity and dialectical quality of that relationship. On the one hand, anticipation of the reaction of the major unions, on issues that impinged directly on their own functions, was an integral feature of the policy process. Thus, with employment and industrial relations' matters, the unions expected, indeed insisted, that policy-making should be a joint party-unions

exercise and reacted with hostility and deep resentment in the period of the 1964–70 Labour Government, when major initiatives were taken unilaterally over incomes policy and trade union legislation (in the famous White Paper *In Place of Strife*). On the other hand, the unions were prepared in all other policy sectors to give the parliamentary leadership very substantial latitude: indeed they believed that it *should* have overall primacy (Minkin 1978b: 317).

A more methodical investigation of the nature and roots of the party–unions connection was the natural next step after the *Labour Party Conference*. ‘I write’, Minkin noted, ‘with glacier-like speed; architect, bricklayer and painter’ (Minkin 1991: xi). In fact, the dozen years he spend compiling the work involved undertaking a considerable research programme, conducting a large number of interviews, inspecting a mound of documentary material, and interweaving and fusing the empirical, the analytical and the explanatory. He has elucidated how he set about the task:

Primarily, I aim to construct a coherent and adequate conceptual framework grounded in the repeated occurrences found in my empirical investigations. This framework is always analytical in the attempt to establish a pattern which makes sense in describing and categorising relationships and developments across time, but it also aspires to be explanatory, organising the material in such a way as to indicate solutions to the core problem (or problems) and related questions under investigation, seeking to account for all cases within a particular historical and cultural setting. (Minkin 1997: 173)

The ambition – to produce a definitive work – was realised. This made his conclusion – a direct challenge to ‘baronial power’ thesis – all the more compelling. Whatever the formal organisational structure of the party would seem to suggest, he stated emphatically, it was ‘virtually always misleading to say that the unions “run the Labour Party”’ (Minkin 1991: 629). Minkin’s concern is not simply to demonstrate, through methodical empirical analysis, that the ‘union control’ model is wrong, but to explain *why* it is wrong. The book accomplishes two major goals. Firstly, it exposes to the most rigorous and exacting scrutiny the features of the party–unions link, chronicling its evolution since the party’s founding in 1900. Secondly, it offers an explanation of the forces governing ‘the contentious alliance’. What this chapter seeks to do is to lay bare the nature of his conceptual framework, his analytical categories and his explanatory mode. But to do this adequately I need to place Minkin’s interpretation in a broader intellectual context.

### Minkin’s sociological frame

#### *Homo economicus*

Elster (1989: 99) has written that

one of the most persistent cleavages in the social sciences is the opposition between two lines of thought conveniently associated with Adam Smith and Emile Durkheim, between *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*. Of these, the former is supposed to be guided by instrumental rationality, while the behaviour of the latter is dictated by social norms.

The popularity curve of the former in the study of political organisations has for a number of years been steadily rising with the increasing use of ‘rational choice’ models. ‘Rational choice theories’, the noted scholar Aaron Wildavsky commented (1994: 132), ‘have been among the most successful in the social sciences.’ *Homo sociologicus*, in contrast, though at present languishing in political science as a whole, lies at the centre of Minkin’s explanatory universe. In considering the value of Minkin’s approach we are also, implicitly, making judgements of the relative heuristic merits of economic and sociological perspectives on human behaviour. I would go further: Minkin’s work, most notably *The Contentious Alliance*, is perhaps the best example (in terms of its thoroughness, depth of thought and analytical sophistication) of the value of *homo sociologicus* to the study of political parties.

Rational choice theory, in essence, involves the application of neo-classical economic models to the study of political phenomena (its proponents claim that it provides the rigour so often lacking in the academic study of politics). As one scholar has recently observed, ‘in contemporary social science, rational-choice theory is perhaps the most coherent and best known approach based on principles of methodological individualism’ (Sil 2000: 362). The kernel of this methodology is the belief that ‘the elementary unit of social life is individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals’ (Elster 1989: 13).

More specifically, it makes two claims. All social action is reducible to individual action. There are, of course, other major forces, public and private institutions, voluntary associations, and so forth, but, in the last resort, they aggregate the behaviour of individuals. It follows that ‘all general propositions about the interactions or relations among individuals can be reduced without loss of meaning to the qualities, dispositions and actions of individuals themselves’ (Sil 2000: 361).

Acting rationally entails selecting the most economical means to achieve given ends. The theory of instrumental rationality stipulates that social actors are utility maximisers, motivated by a desire to promote their own interests. They are goal-directed, in that they consistently follow courses of action that will afford them greater personal satisfaction. Applied specifically to political parties, this means that political influentials will ‘act solely in order to attain income, prestige and power which comes from being in power’. They will seek power either for the pleasure it affords (in terms of personal self-esteem or gratification) or as the means to procure valued goods, such as office, status or material benefits. Hence securing power is, for the rational actor, the overriding objective (Downs 1957: 27–8).

Rational choice institutionalism, which has applied the theory to the study of political organisations, accepts that actors operate within frameworks of rules and arrangements. But their role is limited to providing the stage – the parts, scripts, props and so forth – on which individual actors strive for personal advancement. Institutions provide the strategic context in which optimising behaviour takes place by determining the identity of the key players, the power resources available to them, the rules to which they must adhere and the type of strategic calculations they make (Shepsle 1989: 135).

So the key rational choice postulates (for our purposes) are as follows:

- decision-making is ultimately reducible to conscious, deliberate individual action;
- behaviour is driven by desire to maximise personal or institutional advantage;
- preferences are fixed and consistent, and derive from an accurate awareness of interests; and
- political action is strategic: that is, it involves utilising all available power resources, within set institutional contexts to achieve given goals.

If we apply this approach to the unions–party relationship, the following propositions will naturally emerge (here, for purposes of exposition, I concentrate on the unions):

- Action will be primarily motivated by the aims, interests and calculations of individual union leaders.
- They will be self-interested, that is they will seek to maximise their own interests, those of their organisations and (to the extent that it benefits them) those of the people they represent.
- An identifiable and consistent pattern of preferences – reflecting an informed understanding of where their interests lie – will underpin their choices.
- They will behave strategically by utilising all available resources taking account of costs and benefits of the various options open to them within given institutional settings.

In operational terms, it follows that union leaders would routinely use their entrenched position within the party structure to determine its policy. Two propositions are relevant. Firstly, the party was heavily reliant on union funding, constantly circulating the begging bowl, and this gave unions a lever to influence policy decisions. Secondly, the unions directly elect the trade union section of the NEC (historically over 55 per cent of the total), and would act to push union interests. Minkin subjects both these propositions to detailed scrutiny.

#### Controlling the purse strings

Drawing on a most impressive body of research, Minkin shows that unions' money was not used as leverage to procure favourable policy outcomes. Indeed, any attempt to do so was regarded as improper: 'there were and remain unwritten prohibitions against open threats of financial sanctions, and there were and are inhibitions and constraints which limit the implementation of such sanctions' (Minkin 1991: 626). As Ben Pimlott expressed it: 'He who paid the piper merely played the tuba and the big bass drum' (quoted in Minkin 1991: 626).

#### Controlling the votes

With a battery of examples, Minkin demonstrates that, far from operating as a trade union bridgehead, the NEC's trade union section (with only minor and temporary exceptions) afforded successive Labour leaders a solid block of loyalists. Throughout most of Labour's history (and it remains largely true to this day) 'the

historic role the Trade Union Section of the NEC has been to act as a loyal base responding to the initiatives of the “politicians”, particularly the Parliamentary leadership’ (Minkin 1991: 626).

Let’s explore another rational choice postulate: that trade union leaders will have a 1set and stable pattern of preferences derived from their union interests. If we apply it the 1974–79 Labour Government, when the unions’ power reached its peak, we do indeed find that they used their weight to secure the repeal of the Conservatives’ Industrial Relations Act and the enactment of series of measures designed to augment the individual and collective rights of labour (e.g. the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act, the Equal Pay Act). In the early years of the Government many of the pledges hammered out in negotiations between the parliamentary and TUC leadership prior to the 1974 election were fully implemented – often in the teeth of opposition from business and elements within the civil service.

But this is only part of the story. In his searching analysis of ‘left-wing unionism’, which rehearses the role of Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon of the AUEW – the left-wing ‘terrible twins’ – Minkin uncovers portraits of Scanlon and Jones that diverge quite radically from the figure of the ‘instrumentally rational’ power-maximising ‘baron’. In some areas (as noted) they had a clear set of preferences that they consistently pursued. But elsewhere their stance was characterised by uncertainty, flux, lack of confidence and a general willingness to accommodate to the Government. Indeed ‘Jones and Scanlon had no particularly distinctive economic position’ (Minkin 1991: 169). Trade union officials were frequently to be seen stalking (sometimes to the dismay of the denizens) the corridors of power, but the outcome was less straightforward than is usually supposed. While ministers displayed an unprecedented degree of sensitivity to union preferences those preferences were, in turn, altered, sometimes markedly, in response to the new reference groups and pressures to which their holders were exposed. Both Scanlon and Jones were increasingly persuaded of the validity of the Treasury’s definition of the UK’s economic policies (though not always of their prescriptions) producing a growing gap between the TUC policies to which the two leaders were officially committed and their real views. More generally, while Minkin agrees that union access to and influence over legislation was indeed greater during the 1974–79 Labour Government than in any other peacetime administration, he holds that the orthodox view has exaggerated its scale, ignores its variability and understates its limits (Minkin 1991: 176). Thus the unions played a very prominent role in the shaping of industrial relations and employment legislation, though their influence in other policy sectors was much more modest and, in a number of areas (such as defence policy), negligible.

But the political trajectory pursued by the two by no means ran in parallel. The one-time Marxist Scanlon moved significantly to the Right as he came to accept the so-called Bacon–Eltis thesis, ‘heavily pushed by economic journalists and by the Treasury at this time . . . high levels of public expenditure were starving the market sector of resources, causing deindustrialisation and weakening the economy’, and, for that reason, largely acquiesced in the Government’s shift to a more

monetarist orientation in economic policy (Minkin 1991: 170). Jack Jones, in contrast, remained a (cautious) proponent of higher public spending. How can we account for this?

Rational choice could provide part of the explanation. The AUEW's membership base was in private manufacturing industry, and, therefore, could be seen as a potential beneficiary of cutbacks in public spending (though only on the much-contested assumption that the Bacon–Eltis thesis was correct). The TGWU membership, in contrast, straddled both public and private sectors, manufacturing and services (see Steve Ludlam's discussion in chapter 10). But, equally important – as Minkin stresses – were the two men's differing views on politics and on their respective industrial roles. Scanlon always strictly compartmentalised 'the industrial and the political' and moved increasingly to the Right (he was eventually to be ennobled). Jones's trade unionism, in contrast, was much more infused 'with ideological values of democratic and economic egalitarianism' – a difference reflected in the quite disparate views of the two men on the issue of industrial democracy – and was a relentless campaigner against poverty, especially that of the elderly (Minkin 1991: 165). He was to spend two decades after his retirement as a tireless crusader for higher pensions.

More fundamentally, Minkin challenges the notion that the key motive-force of union leaders, in their relationship with the Labour Party and government, is primarily defined by their desire to maximise their personal and institutional interest. This implies that the unions and the Labour Party constitute two quite separate units. In reality, Minkin shows, union leaders regarded themselves not as outsiders but as insiders, members of the party *they* helped to found: they were as much part of the party as MPs or constituency organisations. Although the issue of the degree of power the unions possessed – as manifested, for instance, in the size of the unions' vote at the Labour Party Conference – was, as they came to acknowledge, a legitimate ground for concern, they insisted that they had as much *right* as any other unit within 'the labour movement' to participate in the party's affairs. This party–unions alliance was, in part, instrumental, a matter of interest and power; it was, however, no less ideological (a shared inventory of values and goals), and expressive and solidaristic (common origins, history and experiences). But this brings us out of the territory of *homo economicus* into that of *homo sociologicus*.

### *Homo sociologicus*

*Homo sociologicus* is grounded in a notion of 'social action' which differs markedly from that of *homo economicus*, both conceptually and methodologically. It repudiates the notion that all social interaction is explicable in terms of individually driven behaviour, insisting instead on the irreducibility of specifically *social* facts: phenomena that exist outside the minds of individuals – though which are internalised by them (Durkheim 1982). This key methodological premiss derives from Durkheim's understanding of society as 'not a mere sum of individuals; rather the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristic' (quoted in Lukes 1973: 19). *Only* individuals can act, but *how and*

why they act as they do is explicable only in terms of the social milieu they inhabit, their upbringing and their social experiences and relationships. What some have called 'methodological collectivism' (or 'holism') contends that collectivities of one sort or another (including society itself) have their own properties, their own regularised patterns which imprint themselves on individuals and shape the way in which they act. Social action is not simply a function of calculated self-interest – since selves themselves are social constructs; and notions of self-interest are therefore contingent upon how the self is constructed (Wildavsky 1994: 140).

Minkin draws heavily from this tradition in developing his three central concepts: 'rules', roles and relations. In a core proposition Minkin contends (1991: 27) that 'it is impossible to understand the trade union–Labour Party relationship (and much else about the Labour Movement) without understanding the powerful and long-lasting restraints produced by adherence to [the] "rules"'. Minkin's concept is put within inverted commas to distinguish it from formal rules, for they are unwritten codes and are only rarely given constitutional status: in effect, they constitute norms and conventions. Norms can be defined as precepts stipulating socially prescribed and acceptable behaviour, 'ideas about how classes or categories ought to behave in specified situations' (Haas and Drabek 1973: 110–11). Here we have a clear contrast between *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*. March and Olsen (1984: 741) illustrate the point in comparing the 'choice metaphor' and the 'duty metaphor':

In a choice metaphor, we assume that political actors consult personal preferences and subjective expectations, then select actions that are as consistent as possible with those preferences and expectations. In a duty metaphor, we assume that political actors associate certain actions with certain situations by rules of appropriateness. What is appropriate for a particular person in a particular situation is defined by the political and social system and transmitted through socialisation.

Minkin follows the 'duty metaphor'.

We must be cautious about over-dichotomous thinking here. *Homo sociologicus* does not (or should not) discount the role of self-interest and ambition – of vanity, status-seeking, greed, even – whose part in the politics of labour receives, from Minkin, its due attention. The point is that such action is 'embedded in an institutional structure of rules, norms, expectations, and traditions that severely limited the free play of individual will and calculation' (March and Olsen 1984: 736).

For Minkin, the key to understanding why the trade unions have not dominated the Labour Party lies in the 'playing of different roles' in a system of functional differentiation (Minkin 1991: 26). Along with the 'rules', *role* is a central organising concept in Minkin's work. A role comprises 'a cluster of norms that applies to any single unit of social interaction' (see Haas and Drabek 1973: 110–1). In other words, the role of, say, a trade union member of the NEC comprises the various norms and conventions attached to it. Role theory posits that role-holders will behave in accordance with role requirements – as formally laid down, as conceived by themselves and as expected by others in the organisation. Thus Minkin contends (1991: 396) that the fundamental flaw of conventional wisdom, with its



image of the ‘union baron’, is that it takes no account of ‘the crucial inhibitions involved in trade union role-playing and their obedience to “rules” of the relationship’.

Roles, in turn, mould relationships by shaping the way in which members interact, laying down sets of mutual expectations and anticipations. Established relations between political and trade union role-holders comprised the superstructure of understanding that knits the party together. Conversely, the belief that roles were being transgressed could rupture relations and cause acute internal dissension. Those who refused to enact their roles in the appropriate manner – Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Miners being a classic example – would always be outriders. Understanding purposive conduct within an organisation, then, is not simply a matter of analysing how power- and interest-maximising individuals navigate institutional rules, constraints and opportunities the better to satisfy their goals, for those very goals, and the choice of means to realise them, are shaped by the ethos of the organisation.

#### Roles and ‘rules’

Minkin applies these analytical categories by considering the roles that trade union and party leaders play: ‘How and when did it happen that union leaders adopted particular rules? What agency or processes continued to socialise new union leaders into the codes of conduct?’ (Minkin 1997: 283). The main organising motif in the conceptual structure of *The Contentious Alliance* is his painstaking elaboration of the ‘rules’. These ‘rules’ are akin to Durkheim’s *conscience collective*: ‘the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively’ and, by virtue of their collective provenance, ‘invested with a special authority’ (Durkheim 1982: 55). Minkin’s central proposition (1991: xiv) is that power relations between the unions and the party ‘cannot be fully understood without appreciating the inhibitions, restrictions and constraints that the “rules” produced’. These rules ‘acted as boundaries producing inhibitions which prevented the absolute supremacy of leadership groups in either wing of the relationship’.

What are these ‘rules’? Minkin enumerates the following: freedom, democracy, unity and solidarity, to which is coupled, slightly awkwardly, priority – ‘the operative principle of trade unionism’.

- *Freedom* is defined in terms of autonomy: ‘the collective capacity to promote the industrial freedom of workers and the right to realise this with minimum interference from political bodies’. By extension this came to encompass mutual respect for the independence and institutional integrity of the labour movement’s industrial and political wings, a respect which, in turn, was interpreted to bar the application by trade unionists of party sanctions to bring party policy into line with that of the TUC – ‘a conscious self-restraint in the use of potential levers of power’ (Minkin 1991: 28, 30). Irrespective of the precise wording of the formal rules, neither political nor industrial leaders were expected to encroach upon the territory of the other, defined by its functional responsibilities.

- By *democracy* was meant a commitment to collective majoritarian decision-making – though firmly qualified by respect for the autonomy of the PLP and the frontbench over the prioritising and method of implementing Labour Party Conference decisions.
- *Unity* referred to the striving after maximum consensus and the containing of disagreements, and was associated also with an ingrained belief that parliamentary leadership should be pre-eminent on the NEC.
- *Solidarity* was an application of the ‘fundamental ethics of trade unionism’, which prescribed ‘loyalty to the collective community [and] the sacrifice, if necessary, of immediate sectional interest’. In the context of party–unions relations it took the form of trade union leaders assuming a ‘parental obligation to the Party to play a stabilising role’ (Minkin 1991: 37–8). These emotional and moral compulsions of solidarity with party and (when in office) Government could ‘be so great times to produce a denial of immediate interest’ (1991: 178). An interesting example of this was the position – or, rather, the reluctance to take a position – of trade union leaders when the Labour Cabinet engaged in its prolonged struggle over whether to accept the harsh conditions of the IMF loan in 1976. Tony Crosland proved a formidable and lucid critic of the severe cutbacks in public spending – which were to lead an actual *fall* in health spending – demanded by the IMF (and its controllers in Washington), but trade union leaders like Scanlon and Jones, historically and formally still well to Crosland’s Left, kept quiet. The survival of the Labour Government, they believed, was at stake and it was *not* the role of union leaders in such circumstances to rock the boat.
- These values are supplemented by the principle of *priority* (Minkin 1991: 40–2). While the unions had policies on a very wide range of issues, not all are actively promoted. Lifetime immersion in collective bargaining encouraged ‘a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, a reliance on experience as a guide to appropriate response and a stress on the best available outcome’. Conceptions of realism and practical politics fused with a focus on those matters which impinged most forcefully on the institutional needs of unions, and which were uppermost in the minds of their members to determine those goals and policies that were accorded priority. Thus in practice the willingness of union leaders to assert their power was shaped and constrained by a range of factors: the relevance of particular issues to their unions; the extent to which they were bound by unequivocal union mandates; the preferences of the parliamentary leadership; and the need to sustain the unity and the electoral appeal of the party.

How did the ‘rules’ and the performance of the roles they engendered operate to form regular and discernible patterns of behaviour? Let us return to the comparison between *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*. For the former the relationship between subject and object, between actor and the external environment, is relatively unproblematical. If actors are ‘rational’ – that is, if understanding is informed and open-minded, interests clearly and precisely identified, and ‘realities’

dispassionately appraised – a cool assessment can be made as to how their ends can be most efficiently achieved. As events are observed, feedback allows experience to guide judgement and amend behaviour accordingly (March and Olsen 1988: 343). The analyst, accordingly, can (in a way broadly comparable to that of the natural scientist) observe, classify, explain and perhaps even predict patterned behaviour. *Homo sociologicus*, however, construes the relationship between actor and setting quite differently. Social and natural phenomena differ fundamentally because in the former conscious actors invest with meaning the events they experience. Accordingly, since ‘the distinctive trait of human behaviour is . . . that there are connections and rules that can be interpretively understood’, the task of the social scientist is decipher them – to explore how people make sense of the situations they encounter (Weber quoted in Eckstein 1996: 483). This is the task Minkin sets for himself.

His first step is to determine the process by which the ‘rules’ emerged. It is characteristic of Minkin’s method (first elaborated in *The Labour Party Conference*) to explain institutions by tracing their development historically. The evolution of the ‘rules’ he sees as ‘in the main, an organic process’, the products of the ‘fundamental values of trade unionism’, derived ultimately from the encounter between institutional needs and industrial experience. In a way typical of the institutions of labour in Britain, it took the form of ‘unwritten understandings and a strong sense of the protocol of rule-governed behaviour’ (Minkin 1991: 27). The content of the ‘rules’ stemmed from functional differentiation, the growing division of responsibilities between what came to be labelled the industrial and political wings of ‘the movement’: each had its own needs, tasks and interests, with the relationship regulated by common norms. Each new generation was inducted into the culture by organisational socialisation, that process by which ‘the beliefs, norms and perspectives of participants are brought into line with those of the organisation’ (Etzioni 1965: 246). Minkin (1991: 46) writes:

Trade union leaders were socialised into understanding role responsibilities and constraints. General Council definitions of ‘appropriate behaviour’ became a measure of what was perceived as ‘political maturity’. This socialisation process was enforced primarily by normative pressures, by ‘embarrassment, guilt and group hostility’ rather than by sanctions though these . . . were available.

He charts how new left-wing members of the NEC’s trade union section were encouraged to ‘integrate within “the union group” and play the loyal game as it had been played in the past’ (1991: 404–5). Tom Sawyer, who rose to prominence as a senior official of NUPE (the National Union of Public Employees) in the late 1970s, and joined the NEC as a keen ‘Bennite’, gradually evolved into a stalwart of the trade union section (and, indeed, eventually became general secretary of the party) as he increasingly conformed to expectations as to how the role of a trade union NEC member should be properly discharged. More generally, Minkin uncovers the process by which left-wing leaders – notably Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon – who initially queried some of the ‘rules’, increasingly came to subscribe to them. They became more loath to challenge the policy-making prerogative of

the parliamentary leadership (outside of those areas designated as appropriate objectives for joint party–unions determination) and increasingly adopted a ‘protective’ role.

All this explains persistence – recurrent and stable patterns in party–union relations: the ‘rules’ were ‘essentially rules of anchorage’, locating ‘a base and moorings from which it was dangerous to move too far’ (Minkin 1991: 42). But how do we then account for conflict and change? Minkin’s purpose is not only to characterise the parameters which were shaped by the party–unions connection but to identify the forces that allowed it to develop; equally, not only to explain what held it together but what pulled it apart. What, above all, imparted the dynamic to the alliance was that it was, Minkin stresses throughout, always a *contentious* one defined not only by normatively regulated co-operation but by clashes of interest, priorities and aspirations. ‘To understand fully the relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party’, he observes (1991: 628), ‘we have to appreciate both its consistencies and its variabilities.’ His perspective can best be defined as ‘interactionist’, one that envisages norms, roles and relationships coming into conflict and being perpetually revised as circumstances, pressures, political alignments all mutate. From this perspective, organisations can be conceived as arenas characterised by the on-going processes of negotiation and bargaining, where ‘rules’, roles and relationships constantly evolve in response to shifts in the balance of power, in the pattern of political alignments, and in the face of conflicting interests and priorities and environmental shocks. Thus there is always a disparity between, on the one hand, role *prescriptions* and expectations (not least from the rank and file) and, on the other, leaders’ role *performances*, with the latter influenced by multiple forces ranging from role demands, personal role definitions (and idiosyncrasies) and the sheer pressure of events and conflicting demands. This disparity often surfaced in accusations (with varying degrees of credibility) by disillusioned rank-and-filers that a union leader had ‘sold-out’ and had been ‘bought’

Minkin also notes that the ‘rules’ were not immutable. They were always ‘clearer in what they excluded than what they prescribed’, supplying abundant room for interpretation and reworking. There was sufficient plasticity to allow for trade union diversity, the shifting balance of Left and Right political traditions, and different views as to how role responsibilities could best be discharged (Minkin 1991: 43). One instance of this plasticity was ‘multiple-role playing’. As already noted the relations of Jones and Scanlon with former allies on the party’s Left deteriorated after 1974 and, at times, became quite strained. Notwithstanding, when casting union votes, at the Labour Party Conference or for the women’s section of the NEC, they continued to back left-wing candidates. What was appropriate conduct in one forum was not necessarily appropriate in another.

### The continued relevance of Minkin

The aforementioned account allows for and helps to explain incremental change in the relationship – but what if the change was qualitative? The ‘rules’ – the whole labourist culture – have since the election of Tony Blair to Labour’s leadership been

under sustained assault. Blair, it has been noted, has ‘no sympathy, enthusiasm or concern for the collective values of trade unionism such as solidarity and feels no need to identify himself with them’ (Taylor 2000). The fact that the party–unions relationship ‘had changed in quite fundamental ways’ (Howell 2000: 34) is a judgement from which few would dissent. The party–unions connection acquired many of its defining properties, it has been seen in this chapter, from a process of functional differentiation. But this notion implies the existence of a common organism, a system each of whose inter-related parts had a distinct function to discharge but which operated for the survival and advancement of the whole. But is this any long true – has functional specialisation and differentiation metamorphosed into separation?

Minkin identifies four variables determining the extent to which harmony characterised the relationship:

- *ideology* registers the degree to which there was ‘general ideological agreement on aims and values’;
- *interest* registers the degree of correspondence between unions’ definitions of the interests of the workforce and the party leadership’s notion of the national interest;
- *social affinity* registers the degree of social affinity between the leaderships of the two wings; and
- *strategic convergence* registers the degree of strategic compatibility between the party and the unions.

To the extent that there was sufficient overlap in these four areas, unity of purpose could be sustained. There was enough commonality to sustain the alliance, though ‘there was also enough divergence to engender permanent tensions’ (Minkin 1991: 9).

As a preliminary to exploring the argument further I want to point to what seems to me to be a weakness in Minkin’s account. He suggests that the ‘rules’, and the role responsibilities they engendered, related to *political* as much as *industrial* leaders of the movement. Though there were ‘some important variations in definition and emphasis’, he held that the ‘rules’ enmeshed both parliamentary and trade union leadership in ‘mutual expectations and obligations’ (1991: 286–7, 47). But is this claim really substantiated? He himself acknowledges (1991: 45) that the “rules” laid down a network of obligations, mutual in form but most restrictive in effect, upon the potentially omnipotent trade unions and their senior leaders. I think we need to take this further. There was always much greater variation in the degree to which the outlook of political leaders was permeated by the ‘rules’. This has been taken much further with the emergence of ‘New Labour’, which is characterised as a whole (there are individual differences) by a wariness towards anything that smacks too much of (what the ‘New’ chooses to label) ‘Old Labour’. For some, indeed, proximity to the unions seems to cause profound discomfort. Invocation of ‘This Great Movement of Ours’ (TIGMOO) was a staple of the Conference’s rhetoric, but for many reflected a real sense of common traditions, loyalties and symbols. For many within New Labour circles, TIGMOO belongs to the dark

days, an old skin now cast off. It may well be that one of the most profound changes signalled by New Labour is the rapid dwindling among the parliamentary leadership of any real feeling of involvement in a shared movement.

Weakening if not terminating the alliance, Chris Howell argues, is 'the defining core of the [Blairite] modernisation project'. He adduces as evidence the following points: that both in setting the new minimum wage and in reshaping industrial relations legislation closer attention was paid to the concerns of business than to those of the unions. The overwhelming bulk of Conservative industrial relations legislation remains in force, and has been endorsed by New Labour, including strict regulation of, and limits upon, industrial action and the survival of a highly flexible labour market. Procedurally, business is far better represented in the numerous government task forces than by the unions, while union influence is heavily reliant on informal and personal contacts (Howell 2000: 33).

Nevertheless, as Ludlam (2001) has pointed out, the alliance has displayed unexpected resilience. Though there is no doubt that the influence and access the unions possess now is much less than under any previous majority Labour Government, they are still appreciably greater than under the Tories – and that is unlikely to change. In some major areas of policy – notably the growing private sector involvement in the delivery of public services and the enthusiasm for 'labour market flexibility' – the gap between the Government and the unions is now alarmingly wide, though in other areas the balance sheet for the unions is much more positive. North-European-style corporatism will not be introduced, one can confidently predict, under New Labour, but at least the unions are once more 'insiders'. Conversely, though the party is much less reliant on trade union money than in the past, it is still heavily dependent for the effective conduct of election campaigns on the unions' resources – manpower, office space and equipment. Indeed, as evidence mounts that the number and commitment of constituency activists is rapidly shrinking – the grass is coming away at the roots – that dependence will almost certainly intensify. Equally, trade union organisations and networks have proved invaluable allies for New Labourites (Blairites and Brownites) – whether in terms of promoting leaders (there have been setbacks here!), securing parliamentary nominations, or competing for places in party organs such as the NEC, the Policy Forum and the Scottish, Welsh and London Executives (Shaw 2001). And 'parental obligation to the Party to play a stabilising role' continues to manifest itself mainly in protective loyalty to a Labour Government in the face of left-wing criticism – as demonstrated by the behaviour of the trade union section of the NEC (Davies 2001). It is noticeable that calls from New Labour circles for a loosening of the connection are now more muted.

There are, however, warning signs. For the first time, union funding is being used as an instrument of pressure, though largely due to demands from an increasingly disenchanted rank and file within the public sector unions. In July 2001 the GMBU (General Workers' and Boilermakers' Union) – an organisation which has never been associated with the Left – decided to cut £1 million over four years from its funding of the party. In the public service union UNISON, rank and file pressure forced the passage of a motion calling for a review of the party–unions link

(*Guardian*, 18 July 2001) Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the unions should consider giving priority to representing their members' interests 'rather than being expected to dance to the tune of a piper they pay' (Kevin Maguire in *Guardian*, 26 June 2001). The party–unions connection is entering upon its most turbulent phase yet.

## Conclusion

Minkin has demolished the image of the 'bullies with the block vote', of 'union barons' lording it over the party. By a relentless accumulation of detail he punctures one myth after another. But he goes well beyond correcting the historical record: he explains why the baronial power thesis is wrong. In so doing, he uncovers the limits of rational-choice-style theories of political behaviour. Political actors are role-players and their roles combine into complexes and are enshrined in organisational forms. Roles comprise norms and conventions, or the 'rules', and these, he convincingly establishes, have profoundly affected power- and policy-making within the party. Above all, they have structured the party–unions connection. Minkin argues (1991: 27):

The role playing, the 'rules' and the protocol which went with them produced a syndrome of inhibition and self-control which was the most remarkable feature of a relationship in which all the potential levers of power appeared to lie in the hands of the unions. But they also provided a network of *mutual* restraint specifying obligations which were a duty on both sides of the relationship.

And role-playing, we see, was a matter of constant renegotiation and mutual adjustment – a creative exercise, and a source of change and of conflict as well as of persistence. Parties, he shows, are social as well as political systems, intricate fabrics of positions, roles, rules and relationships, as well as a forum for competing ideas and interests.

But is Minkin the historian of a movement that is reaching the end of its natural life? The degree of general ideological agreement on aims and values between 'New' Labour and the bulk of the affiliated unions has substantially diminished. Equally significant is the fraying of the functional and solidaristic bases of cohesion: the old 'ties of sentiment and loyalty and agreed ideological commitment', as Robert Taylor (2000) has put it, are now fading away. The Labour Party, certainly, is undergoing a process of transformation. Is the link (as a growing number within the unions are beginning to argue) now a handicap for the unions and their members? Has the party's metamorphosis into 'New' Labour fundamentally altered the rules and norms governing the relationship? We do not know the answers. But only by studying the changing norms, conventions, role conceptions and aspirations – the cultural fabric of organisational life – can we commence the search for answers. In short, *homo sociologicus*, as *The Contentious Alliance* demonstrates so well, still has much more to offer than does *homo economicus*.

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