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Colin Crouch, "Making Capitalism Fit for Society".
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, XII + 203 pp.

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Book Review

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I view this admirable new book by Colin Crouch as the final component of a very successful trio of high grade works, following on from his *Post-Democracy* [2004] and *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* [2011]. To employ a medical metaphor, I would say that the first two components of the trio constituted, together, a *diagnosis* and a *prognosis* of the contemporary global crisis, while the third prospects a *therapy* for it. I say “prospects,” not “prescribes,” on account both of the inherent depth and width of the crisis itself, and of the intellectually mature and thus tentative tone and content of Crouch’s whole argument.

This argument (as that of the previous books in the trio) demonstrates in the first place the author’s mastery of the factual *making* and *makings* of the crisis. It is grounded on a mass of empirical information derived from carefully assembled and analysed research data. There is nothing hasty or generic about this aspect of Crouch’s discourse. It advances a number of grounded generalizations, but many of these differentiate between the circumstances obtaining say, in Europe vs the US, as well as between the Northern and the Southern European countries. (Furthermore, its discussion of the Greek case dating, which dates back to the year 2013, remains very enlightening, in spite of the obvious fact that it ignores the momentous developments that case has undergone since then, and indeed it undergoes, *as I write*, not only from one day to the next but literally from an hour and the next).

Crouch devotes the same attention to the *temporal* variation between classes of related phenomena. For reasons we’ll see, he tracks in particular the developments undergone, since the end of World War Two, by the policies of socialist, social democratic and labor parties. (As to these, of course, he focuses on the British experience, in particular the advent of so-called New Labour, and his judgment on this is basically negative).

The second striking feature of Crouch’s argument is its theoretical sophistication. It convincingly conceptualizes diverse aspects of the phenomena he surveys. For instance, he assigns the notion of *externalities* a wider range of aspects than that usually subsumed under that notion. He points up some significant ideological and pragmatic differences between three distinctive manifestations of the neo-liberal hegemony. It analyses the most significant relationships between clusters of phenomena – from overarching ones such as globalization or growing socio-economic inequality, to the changing nature of the employment relation, the arrangements made within different countries for the existence and the management of mass media, the managerialization of academic institutions, or the political impact of immigration. Thus Crouch’s discourse both assists readers in exploring the complexity of the on-going situation and challenges them to follow (or to dissent from) its own sustained interpretation of them.

Third feature. As always, Crouch expresses himself in a distinctively articulate and persuasive manner. His argument is well-organized: it signals clearly its successive themes, and expressly justifies and when necessary qualifies the treatment of each. These

virtues of his exposition serve admirably the intent of the whole trio of works: to address their respective themes in a way that is accessible to a broad, cultured public, but to do so while developing with depth and rigor a forceful and original sociological argument. As a device toward this effect, chapter 5, which addresses a key topic of the whole book – contemporary trends in the nature and dimensions of economic inequality – expounds the relevant empirical data in a set of especially designed tables, but before doing this presents their import in clear, non-technical prose.

To take up the medical metaphor again, what Crouch prospects as *therapy* is a set of measures which this review will not discuss, but which taken together amount to a distinctive new phase of the historical mission of social democracy.

Too often, in recent decades, that mission has been understood and pursued in “defensive” terms. For instance, unions have doggedly fought “for [employees’] rights to hold on to existing jobs at a time when many people have no jobs at all, and when technological and market change are leading to the destruction of many firms and job types.” Unfortunately “in the short term, job preservation for established workers creates outsiders on temporary contracts and other forms of precarious work among younger generations, who feel alienated from the efforts of trade unions and traditional labour law” [pp. 66-67].

On the other hand, “assertive” social democracy, as Crouch presents and advocates it, considers as irreversible (and as having some positive aspects) the broad phenomenon of globalization; above all it acknowledges the merits of the market as the overall institutional framework of the continuing production of goods and services. But it expressly dissents from, and as far as possible opposes, many aspects of the theory and practice of the neo-liberal hegemony – those, in particular, which favour and foster massive inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income, create financial “bubbles,” generate (and disregard) multiple externalities, and expose the majority of the population to increasing risks, no longer moderated by welfare provisions.

The role of political parties of the left in espousing such “assertive” positions and the policies they inspire must be complemented by their alliances with a broad range of movements, organizations, bodies of opinion, which express the diverse and changing values and needs of the civil society. The best indication of how significant such alliances can be – in spite of the attendant frictions and perhaps rivalries – is constituted by the ideological, political, cultural impact of (broadly understood) *feminist* movements on contemporary social development.

If, over the next few years, Crouch’s continuing production well falsifies my view of his three books from the early twenty-first century as constituting a self-standing trio, so be it – we all stand to gain from his continuing engagement with the most significant aspects of the contemporary global situation. For the time being, at any rate, the books in question make a very enlightening contribution to the on-going controversy on the increasingly fraught relationship between capitalism and democracy.

References

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