

**‘Why cross the river to fill the pail?’ Economic and
Political Power in the Political Thought of Aneurin
Bevan**

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Abstract

Aneurin Bevan has achieved a substantial legacy in British politics. He is often invoked in debates on a wide-range of political issues, with politicians continually referring to the 'principles' of Bevan. These references to Bevan's principles create a problem: what exactly are they? I am attempting to tackle this by studying Bevan's political thought, treating him as a political thinker, analysing his body of work, and attempting to see whether a coherent political thought can be discerned.

This paper will analyse the role of economic and political power in Bevan's thought, as expressed in his book *In Place of Fear* (1952). "Why cross the river to fill the pail?" was a rhetorical question asked by trade unionist Noah Ablett: why seek power through parliamentary means when power can be obtained at the point of production? This paper will demonstrate that Bevan's critique of this position is important to understanding his conception of power. While his thought was a product of his Marxist education and his life experiences in the trade union movement, stressing the centrality of class in capitalist society, his theorisation of British political institutions led him to stress the efficacy of political power in enacting radical change in society. This analysis of economic and political power in *In Place of Fear* will lay the foundations of discerning Bevan's political thought.

Bevan and Power

Aneurin Bevan (b.1897) has achieved a substantial legacy in British politics. Since the formation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948 he has been hailed widely as the 'founder of the NHS', spearheading the creation of a service which has become ingrained in the life of British society. Since his death in 1960, Bevan has been immortalised by the Labour Party as someone who was able to combine ambitious socialist ideals to practical policy making.

Bevan's legacy has played a part in how politicians have tackled debates, not just on the NHS, but on a wide-range of political issues. If a politician can be seen to be protecting or fighting on behalf of Bevan's legacy then, the logic goes, the voters will appreciate their actions. Indeed, it is very common to find politicians refer to 'the principles of Bevan'. The late Welsh First Minister Rhodri Morgan would refer to "the traditions of Titmus, Tawney, Beveridge and Bevan" or the need to "adhere to Nye Bevan's founding principles" as a way of articulating the values that apparently have underpinned the Welsh Labour Party's policies since devolution (Morgan 2002, BBC 2008).

The references to Bevan's principles create a problem: what exactly are Bevan's principles? The question strikes at the heart of one of the difficulties resulting from invoking Bevan's name: he is different things to different people. For some, he was a passionate left-wing radical, railing against the ruling class. For others, he was a principled politician but one who understood the importance of being pragmatic and compromising to get things done. Which Bevan is the true Bevan?

I am attempting to tackle this by studying the political thought of Aneurin Bevan. I aim to treat Bevan as a political thinker, analysing his body of work, and attempting to see whether a coherent political thought can be discerned. A difficulty associated with this aim is deciding how

to best organise and frame the analysis of such a large and disparate body of work. This has led me to view Bevan's thought through the lens of power. Power will be used as a heuristic device through which to view Bevan's thought and organise the many elements within it. Power was central to Bevan's thought, expressed most clearly in the opening page of his 1952 book *In Place of Fear*:

"I started my political life with no clearly formed personal ambition as to what I wanted to be, or where I wanted to go. I leave that nonsense to the writers of romantic biographies. A young miner in a South Wales colliery, my concern was with the one practical question, where does power lie in this particular state of Great Britain, and how can it be attained by the workers? No doubt this is the same question as the one to which the savants of political theory are fond of addressing themselves, but there is a world of difference in the way it shaped itself for young workers like myself. It was no abstract question for us. The circumstances of our lives made it a burning luminous mark of interrogation. Where was power and which the road to it?" (Bevan 1952, p. 1).

My research will utilise Michael Mann's IEMP model of power, which stresses the importance of four sources of power; ideological, economic, military and political power. These four sources of power will be analysed due to their relevance to Bevan's thought. This paper will focus on economic and political power in Bevan's thought.

The question "why cross the river to fill the pail?" asked by the miners' leader Noah Ablett was a central question for Bevan (p. 19). Ablett was questioning why power should be sought through Parliament and electoral means when power was at the point of production and economic power of the unions could be wielded by the workers. It will be demonstrated that economic power was central to Bevan's political thought and his analysis of class and capitalism informed his political outlook. However, Bevan's theorisation of the role of political institutions and their potential to radically transform society, led him to believe in the efficacy of democracy and Parliament as the means through which the working class could achieve power. A distinction will be made between theory and practice in Bevan's thought: the theory of capitalism, class struggle and power, and the practice of achieving power for the working class. The capture of power by the working class, from the ruling capitalist class, was vital to achieve emancipation for people in society.

A note: In Place of Fear

For the purposes of this paper, Bevan's 1952 work *In Place of Fear* will be the focus of the analysis. While it is more akin to a series of essays than a deliberate and developed political treatise, it is the most detailed articulation of Bevan's political views. A comprehensive analysis of Bevan's thought throughout his career is vital to identify change, continuity or any theoretical breaks. However, in the interest of providing an overview, this paper will treat *In Place of Fear* as the central Bevan text to understanding his political thought.

Economic Power

The first source of power to be analysed will be economic power. Michael Mann wrote that economic power “derives from the human need to extract, transform, distribute, and consume the produce of nature” (Mann 2012, p.9). Formed around these tasks is a grouping called a “*class*...Those able to monopolize control over production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” is the “dominant class” (Mann 1986, p. 24).

Bevan’s political thought focused heavily on his critique of capitalist society. His outlook was shaped by his experiences in Tredegar, where he grew up and went on to become a miner at the age of 13. He became a miners’ agent and could have even himself continued on a route to become a miners’ leader rather than an MP. His experiences of unemployment, poverty and fighting for better pay and working conditions enshrined in him a desire to transform the relations of production in favour of the workers. The obtaining of economic power by the working class was a central to the development of his thought.

Three key themes related to economic power will be focused upon in this research: class, capitalism and what I have termed ‘praxis’. Bevan’s analysis of class and his critique of capitalism were central to understanding his political thought. His conception of economic power and the humiliating effect its use by the ruling class had on the working class was the basis of his political outlook.

I have called the third theme ‘praxis’, referring to “action, activity; and in Marx’s sense to the free, universal, creative and self-creative activity through which man creates (makes, produces) and changes (shapes) his historical, human world and himself” (Petrović 1983, p.384). In my analysis, praxis refers to the strategies the working class would use to organise and then change their material circumstances. This paper will show that the practice through which Bevan envisioned capturing power would change – nonetheless, it was his analysis of class conflict which shaped the way the working class should operate to capture economic power.

Class

Bevan stated that the question “Where was power and which the road to it?” “was shaped into a class form, not an individual form” (1952, p. 1). He stressed the importance of class in the economic relations of society and that the working class should be united in order to strengthen its collective power. He stressed the importance of the collective economic power of the working class, writing that “for us power meant the use of collective action designed to transform society and so lift all of us together” (p. 2). Instead of viewing society individual self-interest, the working class saw society as the collective striving of classes. Society “presented itself...as an arena of conflicting social forces and not as a plexus of individual striving”. In Bevan’s analysis of society, he saw three conflicting social forces: poverty, property and democracy – “They are forces in the strict sense of the term, for they are active and positive. Among them no rest is possible”. Bevan’s definition of poverty was broad, being “the normal state of millions of people in modern industrial society, accompanied by a deep sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with the existing state of social affairs”. Property in this tripartite is wealth, and those “who, by possession of wealth, have a dominating influence on the policy

of the nation". Bevan saw that the "conflict between the forces, always implicit, breaks out into open struggle during periods of exceptional difficulty" (p. 3). In a capitalist democracy, the conflict between the three forces "resolves itself into this: either poverty will use democracy to win the struggle against property, or property, in fear of poverty, will destroy democracy". Bevan concluded that from "1929 onwards in Great Britain the stage was set and all the actors assembled in the great drama which is the essence of politics in modern advanced industrial democracies". These actors roughly corresponded to the three forces in society:

"Firstly, there was wealth, great wealth, concentrated in comparatively few hands...Second, there was a working class forming the vast majority of the nation and living under conditions which made it deeply conscious of inequality and preventable poverty. Third, there was fully developed political liberty, expressing itself through constitutional forms which had matured for many centuries and had as their central point an elected assembly commanding the respect of the community" (p. 11)

Two of these forces can be assigned to traditional class distinctions in society – property with the bourgeoisie and the ruling class, poverty with the proletariat or the working class. Democracy is "political democracy which put a new power in the possession of ordinary men and women" (p. 3). But democracy does not fit with a certain class in society. Gerry Healy, reviewing *In Place of Fear* in *Labour Review* in 1952, identified that "social forces in the scientific sense are classes of people having definite relations to existing types of property and specific functions in the processes of production", these being "capitalists, wage-workers, and a varied range of groupings which are a buffer between them". But, he wrote that "democracy is not a social force", but is a "*political* form, an institution of government arising out of and based upon the relations and struggles of the diverse classes within a country" (Healey 1952, p. 2). Democracy is a significant element of Bevan's political thought and his conception of socialism. Democracy as a social force will be explored later. For now, the conflict between two classes in society is the focus. It is this class conflict which informs Bevan's analysis of capitalism and its economic power.

Bevan's analysis of class is to be expected considering the weight he gave to the Marxist school of political thought. He reflected that "In so far as I can be said to have had a political training at all, it has been in Marxism":

"Marx, and the school which he founded, put into the hands of the working class movement of the late nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries the most complete blueprints for political action the world has ever seen... No serious student who studies the history of the last half century can deny the ferment of ideas associated with the names of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Their effectiveness in arming the minds of working-class leaders all over the world with intellectual weapons showed that their teaching had an organic relationship with the political and social realities of their time" (Bevan 1952, p. 17).

Bevan saw that economic power was primarily in the hands of the wealthy ruling class and capital was the dominant source of power in the 1950s meaning that the discontent of the

working class must be aimed at wealth as those who possess it have “a dominating influence on the policy of the nation” (p. 3). Bevan saw the power of the ruling class as a wholly negative form of power as it “derives from the power to exploit the exertion of others. This is a predatory power made possible by carrying over into modern society the concepts of barbarism, when theft, raid and pillage were accepted ways of acquiring property” (p. 64).

A reading of *In Place of Fear* highlights the importance of class in Bevan’s writings. He saw two different groups created by industrial society, waging a conflict against each other. The tension between these two classes was the result of the exploitative nature of capitalist society.

Critique of capitalism

What type of society created the conditions that led to the development of classes?

Unsurprisingly for someone with the educational background and life experiences of Bevan, capitalism created this conflict. Bevan saw capitalism as a mode of production which exerted economic, political, military and ideological power, taking control away from people in society.

Bevan attributed the development of modern society to role “private economic adventure has played in bringing modern industrial techniques into existence. The stimulus of competition, the appetite for profits, and the urge for wealth and power and status—all these played their part in the making of modern society” (p. 37). The development of capitalism and the pursuit of economic power by capitalists created class-conflict in society. It created a society in which the worker was treated terribly and did not have control over their own lives. Bevan wrote that “The merciless exploitation which formed the basis of the unprecedented accumulation of capital equipment in Britain, was made possibly only by a class dictatorship. The rate of capital accumulation was an expression of the denial of consumption goods to the masses of the people” (p. 39). He believed that the “chief causes of instability in capitalist society are unemployment and the fear of it; resentments against preventable poverty; depersonalisation of the worker, and, of course, war” (p. 66).

The search for profits and rapid capital accumulation created the conditions where the working class were un-emancipated. This point can be seen when analysing Bevan’s view of the role of profit and private enterprise as opposed to public spending in the 19th century. He described how public spending was seen as “an enemy of the process of capital accumulation” and to “the rights of the individual” (p. 52). The capitalists were able to make sure that public spending was kept off the agenda, making sure that capital accumulation was the primary concern in society. But this capital accumulation did not lead to individuals being emancipated. Bevan noted the effects of the focus on capital accumulation, stating that “the successful as well as the unsuccessful are un-emancipated in the Competitive Society” (p. 54). Everyone was in conflict with and alienated from each other.

Property, Bevan theorised, was the dominant social force in capitalist society. Bevan argued that the “chief characteristic of the modern competitive society is the feverish accumulation of property in private hands”. The focus on private rather than public spending was the hallmark of this type of society with property and capital being collected in the hands of a few people (p. 76). Bevan argued that not all forms of private property were bad, nonetheless, when a new society is created there should only be one dominant form of property: public property (pp.

118-119). Bevan conceptualised private property as the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. He referred to “Private property in the main sources of production and exchange” (p. 29). Bevan did not explicitly define what property was in his formulation, but in this sense, property is the concentration of control over the means of production. Taking for granted Bevan’s education in Marxist analysis, private property can be conceptualised as Marx’s descriptions of private property as “the antithesis to social, collective property, exist[ing] only where the means of labour and the external conditions of labour belong to private individuals” (Marx 1990, p. 927).

The capitalist drive for profit and the accumulation of private property in very few hands led to terrible consequences for society. Nonetheless, Bevan did acknowledge that while we may have been able to reach that point by different means, we cannot deny the economic power that capitalism had to create a modern and technologically advanced society. But he insisted that we need to look back and understand what had become before and how society had developed if we want to understand how to advance into the future (p. 37). Bevan argued that the “power relations of public and private property must be drastically altered” in developing a better society (p. 118). Economic power was too heavily weighted towards one class in capitalist society.

Praxis: Collective power

A central issue when analysing Bevan’s thought is how the workers could organise to effect social change and to win a final conflict for power. Bevan wrote that everything the working class was reading by Marx and socialist writers such as Eugene V. Debs, Daniel de Leon and Jack London was relevant to their “own industrial and political experience” and “had all the impact of a divine revelation. Everything fell in place. The dark places were lighted up and the difficult ways made easy” (pp. 17-18). Bevan acknowledged the influence of these American thinkers and also syndicalist thinkers in south Wales such as Noah Ablett. For these people, economic power was at the point of production: Bevan quoted Ablett as stating “why cross the river to fill the pail?” – why seek political means of achieving power when power was available at the point of production for the workers? This interpretation of Marxism saw political methods of obtaining power as secondary to obtaining power through economic organisation.

These socialists saw “Parliamentary action...as an auxiliary of direct action by the industrial organisations of the workers”. Bevan and his fellow workers were taught that power “was at the point of production...Going to Parliament seemed a roundabout and tedious way of realising what seemed already within our grasp by more direct means” (p. 19).

Collective power was central to Bevan’s aim to emancipate the working class. Originally he thought this was to be done through industrial democracy. Bevan argued that the working class possessed greater collective power than the State, through the trade unions. Collective power was important, but it was meaningless if it was not to be wielded. Bevan claimed that during the 1926 General Strike, the Labour leaders had not grasped the implication of mass industrial action and those that did were not prepared to accept them (pp. 19-20). The leaders did not take advantage when their coercive power was greater than that of the State (p. 21). The

collective power of the working class may have led to the working class to take control of the means of production and take control of its own economic life.

An analysis of the role of economic power in *In Place of Fear* demonstrates the importance of class to Aneurin Bevan. He reflected on his life in Tredegar and how his experiences were influential in shaping his view of politics and how he conceptualised the search for power. He saw capitalism as a mode of production which gave economic power to the ruling class who possessed a dominance over the working class, creating conflict in society. An important theme which emerges in Bevan's thought is his desire to emancipate the working class. Power became about control; in this case control over one's productive life. People in society should have the opportunity to have power over their own lives.

Bevan's trade union background led him to initially see the value in obtaining power through collective economic action. However, it will be demonstrated that Bevan saw limits to working class collective power. Bevan's conception of class conflict and the nature of capitalist society remained constant, but the strategy to achieve that power needed to take into account another source of power: political power.

Political Power

Bevan's political thought was shaped by his critique of capitalism and his analysis of class. Two competing forces, poverty and property, aligning themselves with the working class and the ruling class respectively, were in conflict with each other. In Bevan's analysis, a third force, democracy, was involved. It was through democracy that poverty aimed to destroy property. On the other hand, in Bevan's formulation, property, in fear of poverty, would seek to destroy democracy. Democracy was largely ignored as a social force when economic power was analysed. Nevertheless, it is a central element in explaining Bevan's political thought.

Democracy is the mechanism through which Bevan envisioned people taking control of their lives. How did this conceptualisation emerge from Bevan's initial analysis of collective power? This was due to the failure of the trade union movement to use its collective power to bring down the government. He attributed this to a number of factors, detailed below, leading him to develop a theory of political power, historically ignored, he argued, by Marxists. He saw that the political power of capitalism was so strong that it needed to be captured by the workers. The ruling class were not only in possession of private property and the wealth that results from it, they were also dominant in the political institutions of Britain. Therefore, Bevan stressed the importance of political sources of power as well as economic sources.

It will be argued here that Bevan saw Parliament as the primary source of political power in Britain. The class conflict that was taking place in society was also taking place in Parliament and Bevan believed that the apparatus of the State needed to be captured and used in the interests of the working class. The Labour Party's role was to capture political power and use it on behalf of the workers. The State could play a transformative role in society. Political power, while separate to economic power, interacted with economic power to take away people's control over their own lives under capitalism. But in the hands of a socialist party, political power could be used to achieve emancipation for individuals in society.

Two key themes will be analysed in relation to political power. Firstly, Bevan's analysis of the State and its institutions will be considered. He saw Parliament as an institution with the potential to enact revolutionary change in society. Secondly, Bevan's belief in the efficacy of political democracy will be analysed to discern how he saw democracy as a way to emancipate society. Bevan's analysis of political power demonstrates the role of praxis in his political thought which emphasised the obtaining of power through political means.

The State

Bevan argued that socialists needed to capture the apparatus of the State and use it to direct policy to the benefit of the working class. By doing this, political power could be wielded to create a better society and work in the interests of everyone. In *In Place of Fear*, Bevan set out the importance of Parliament in this strategy.

Parliament

A large section of *In Place of Fear* focuses on the transformative role that Parliament can play in people's lives as the source of political power. Bevan framed his discussion of Parliament in relation to the failure of the Triple Alliance in 1919 and the failure of the labour leaders during the General Strike in 1926.

It has been demonstrated in this paper that seizing economic power was central to Bevan's political thought. The workers needed to be in possession of the means of production to have control over their own lives. Industrial power through the trade union movement was essential to Bevan's early life and it was through the unions that Bevan originally saw the ability to capture power. However, he wrote that he had come to realise that not everyone in society was able to obtain industrial power. Bevan began to seriously question Ablett's rhetorical statement "Why cross the river to fill the pail?". He believed that power was not simply at the point of production and power needed to be pursued elsewhere. Bevan lamented that those "dreams of easy success did not survive the industrial depression of the twenties". He attributed the death of these dreams to two factors. Firstly, the failure was in part due to the number of people who were unemployed. What sort of power did they possess? "Mass unemployment was a grim school. Industrial power was just what the unemployed did not possess", Bevan wrote. Strike action was ineffective for those without work: "To render industry idle as a means of achieving political victory was hardly an effective weapon in such circumstances. Capitalism had already done it for us". Capitalism had already created a situation where many people were not in work, disempowering them from having control over productive life. Secondly, Bevan laid the blame on the part of the trade union leaders. He argued that "many of the most influential labour leaders had not grasped the revolutionary implications of mass industrial action, and those who had were not prepared to accept them" (pp. 19-20). Bevan's recollection of these events is important in elucidating his conception of political power and its role in emancipating the working class.

Bevan recalled what he had been told by Robert Smillie, President of the Triple Alliance, that during the 1919 strike, the leaders of the Triple Alliance went to Prime Minister Lloyd George with a list of demands on employers knowing that State power would be implicated in what was happening as much of industry was under war-time control. Lloyd George told the leaders

that they had built a powerful instrument and if they went on strike then the government would be defeated. He asked them if they understood the implications of a more powerful force taking over from the State. Smillie quoted Lloyd George as saying to the trade union leaders:

“Gentlemen, you have fashioned, in the Triple Alliance of the unions represented by you, a most powerful instrument. I feel bound to tell you that in our opinion we are at your mercy... In these circumstances, if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us...But if you do so... have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the Government of the country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For, if a force arises in the State which is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State, or withdraw and accept the authority of the State. Gentlemen’ asked the Prime Minister quietly, ‘have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?’” (pp. 20-21).

Smillie told Bevan that “From that moment on...we were beaten and we knew we were”. Bevan wrote that the same thing happened in 1926 when the miners’ leaders “were in no better theoretical position” than they were in 1919. “They had never worked out the revolutionary implications of direct action on such a scale” Bevan argued (p. 21). He ascribed this to his belief that “the authority of parliament is part of the social and political climate of Britain”. It possessed great power, not only politically but also ideologically, in the attitude of reverence it elicited from the people.

Bevan’s recollection of this event, as has been noted, is important in understanding the way he conceptualised the role of the State and the relationship between economic and political power. He summarised the events by writing:

“It was not so much the coercive power of the State that restrained the full use of the workers’ industrial power. That is a typical error of the undeveloped Marxist school. The incident I have described illustrates that. The workers and their leaders paused even when their coercive power was greater than that of the State. The explanation must be sought in the subjective attitude of the people to the existence of the franchise and all that flows from it. The opportunity for power is not enough if the will to seize it is absent, and that will is attendant upon the traditional attitude of the people towards the political institutions that form part of their historical heritage” (p. 21)

The “subjective attitudes of the people”, previously ignored according to Bevan, reflect the ideological power that the institution of Parliament possessed. Both the State and the unions, working collectively, possessed significant power. The collective economic power of the unions was strong and had the potential to take control of the apparatus of the State, however, there needed to be a will to use that power. That will was not there during the strikes detailed by Bevan.

The people of Britain, Bevan argued, had great reverence for democracy and democratic institutions. The failure of Marxism to take account of the “subjective attitude of peoples...is

certainly more responsible than anything else for the failure of the Communists of Great Britain to win a substantial following among the workers” (p. 21). The will for democracy needed to be taken into account. “The classic principles of Marxism were developed when political democracy was as yet in its infancy. The State was a naked instrument of coercion”. There may have previously existed mass inequality, but progress was won by the masses due to sympathy, fear of unrest, and the need to educate people in “the techniques of modern production methods” (p. 22). Bevan noted that the initiative for change always came from the top because the lower stratum of society was politically inarticulate – “Progress lacked the thrust which comes from the people when they are furnished with all the institutions of a fully developed political democracy”. The only inevitable outcome of such a situation was “The theory of the class struggle and the conception of the State, as the executive instrument of the ruling class”. The political power of the ruling class was fully articulated through the State. Bevan believed that in such a state of affairs, where “political freedom” did not exist, the only change would come from social revolution and civil war.

Democracy was a force which could be utilised by the working class. Poverty could use it in order to destroy property. Democracy is a different type of force than poverty and property as it is an instrument to be wielded by either side. Returning to Gerald Healey’s review of *In Place of Fear*, “democracy is not a social force...Democracy, like its opposite dictatorship, is a *political* form, an institution of government arising out of and based upon the relations and struggles of the diverse classes within a country” (p. 2). In this sense then, democracy can be regarded as a political form through which power can be won by either of the classes in society.

In the case of the trade union struggles in which the workers were taking part, Bevan argued that the trade union leaders “had forged a revolutionary weapon without having a revolutionary intention” (p. 25). The government, the ruling class and the land owners crushed the resistance. The miners’ leaders had power in their grasp but did not use it. Bevan reflected that the “events of that time had an eerie character...The currents of history were running strongly against us and in the result we were sucked under” (p. 26). The defeat of the miners was the end of a phase for Bevan leading him to change his view on the pursuit of power: “the pendulum swung sharply to political action. It seemed to us that we must try to regain in Parliament what we had lost on the industrial battlefield”. Bevan’s praxis focused on obtaining political power through Parliament.

Bevan therefore set his sights on Parliament as the source of political power. In order to emancipate the masses, he believed that political power must be won there. He understood Parliament as “a weapon, and the most formidable weapon of all, in the struggle”. Political power must be sought alongside economic power if the masses were to defeat the ruling class and create a society which moved beyond capitalism. In Parliament, “from the outset he [the Socialist] asserts the efficacy of State action and of collective policies...The Socialist dare not invoke the authority of Parliament in meeting economic difficulties unless he is prepared to exhaust its possibilities” (p. 32). Collective power must be sought in Parliament as well as in industry. The fact that British Parliament had an unwritten constitution meant that it had a “revolutionary quality, and enables us to entertain the hope of bringing about social transformations, without the agony and prolonged crises experienced by less fortunate

nations" (p. 100). Bevan argued that "The British constitution, with its adult suffrage, exposes all rights and privileges, properties and powers, to the popular will". Bevan also saw parliament as the representative of society. He believed that there are "two sets of forces" striving for ascendancy in human affairs: "There is the collective will as expressed in representative institutions. There is the will of authority expressed through a variety of other organised groups. The history of man, bloody and tormented, has been the story of the struggle of rival authoritarian powers: church and king, king and nobles, dynasties versus other dynasties, competing imperialisms" (p. 100). The State and its institutions were representative of the people in society.

Nationalisation

Bevan envisioned using the political power of the State as the means through which to obtain economic power for the working class. Capitalism was out of control and needed to be brought under direction so it could best serve the interests of the people. This was a key element in Bevan's thought; he saw nationalisation as a major step towards achieving socialism in Britain.

Bevan framed the discussion as a decision between "private or collective spending" (Chapter IV). When it came to this discussion, Bevan raised a question he considered of central importance: "What is most essential and who is to decide it?" (p. 59). This was a question which concerned the relationship between economic power and the State's role in possessing it. State power must be wielded to prevent the damage that economic power, left in private hands, could inflict. "If economic power is left in private hands, and a distressed people ask Parliament in vain for help, its authority is undermined":

"If confidence in political democracy is to be sustained, political freedom must arm itself with economic power. Private property in the main sources of production and distribution endangers political liberty, for it leaves parliament with responsibility and property with power" (p. 29).

Bevan reflected on the Labour Government of MacDonald and Snowden who "did not look upon parliamentary power as an instrument for transforming the economic structure of society. For them the role of parliament was to be ameliorative, not revolutionary" (p. 30). Bevan envisioned State power as having a transformative and radical impact on the economy and nationalisation as a step towards creating a Democratic Socialist society.

The purpose of nationalisation was to get rid of what Bevan called "dualism" in industry. Managers and workers needed to be aware that they were in full co-operation with each other, not seeking different goals to each other. "The individual citizen will still feel that society is on top of him until he is enfranchised in the workshop as well as at the ballot box" (p. 103). The goal of nationalisation was to give economic power to the workers and allow them to have a stake in running their industries. "The advance from State ownership to full Socialism is in direct proportion to the extent the workers in the nationalised sector are made aware of a changed relationship between themselves and the management". Managers were reluctant to accept this but Bevan said that where it had been put into effect, the workers were shown to take full part in managing their own affairs for the good of the industry (pp. 104-105).

Bevan argued that the Labour Party had not followed socialist principles enough when formulating its plans for nationalisation. Nationalisation needed to be combined with a socialist belief in public control. He argued that the party bowed to pressure from the Press who feared having civil servants in charge, so the result was the nationalised industries were in the hands of management boards. This, Bevan argued, reflected the old belief in private enterprise. He argued for ministerial control of nationalised industries, rather than power over these industries being in the hands of unelected boards (pp. 97-98). The boards of nationalised industries, he argued, were a “constitutional outrage” (p. 98).

Private enterprise could not be directed. The only way to create a new and better society was for the State to arm itself with economic power and direct the economy in the interests of society. “That [creating a new design for society] cannot be done until effective social and economic power passes from one order of society to another” (pp. 117-118). Through analysing Bevan’s arguments for nationalisation, the relationship between economic and political power in Bevan’s thought can begin to be discerned. Political power needed to be used to take control of and direct the economy. State power needed to arm itself with economic power.

Democracy and Political Liberty

Political power had another dimension in Bevan’s thought. Political power was not only a source of power that political institutions possessed, it was also a power possessed by the masses in society. Just as obtaining economic power was central to empowering society, political liberty would also enhance people’s lives. The Labour Party as the representatives of the working class would act in the interests of the people who would have the liberty to choose their governments and hold them to account. Bevan wrote that political democracy put “a new power in the possession of ordinary men and women” (p. 3). He held a belief that democracy, and representative institutions associated with democracy, gave people the power to have their voices heard.

Parliament was the institution that would give voice to peoples’ wants and frustrations. Parliament itself wields significant political power, but it also functions to give power back to the people:

“The function of parliamentary democracy, under universal franchise, historically considered, is to expose wealth-privilege to the attack of the people. It is a sword pointed at the heart of property-power. The arena where the issues are joined is Parliament” (p. 5).

Bevan believed that “Political democracy brings the welfare of ordinary men and women on to the agenda of political discussion and demands its consideration” (p. 5). Understanding Bevan’s views towards democracy and democratic institutions is central to discerning his conception of power. Collective power, whether that be through the trade union movement or through the Labour Party in Parliament, could be used to transform the economy and also society. But democracy itself could give people the power to speak up and have a voice. It could provide the liberty to live your life in the knowledge that your political representatives will take your demands seriously and have your welfare at heart. The notion of “liberty” is a fundamental term in Bevan’s political thought. Bevan wrote that “Political liberty is the highest condition to

which mankind has yet aspired” (p. 40). It is closely linked to the idea of freedom, central to Bevan’s conception of Democratic Socialism as an ideology which would emancipate society. Bevan refers continuously to the need for political liberty.

Bevan extended this analysis to the rest of the world and also the colonies under British control. He wrote that “Political and economic exploitation is resented with supercharged bitterness when it occurs at the hands of a foreign power; for then the emotions of class and nation merge” (p. 22). In the developing world, social revolutions needed to be helped in order to arm citizens with political power. Development of political liberty in countries where social revolutions are taking place should not be starved. The way to make sure they succeed, and people have the opportunity to develop their material wealth, is to provide them with aid (pp. 41-42).

Bevan’s belief in liberty reflects the significance of economic and political sources of power in Bevan’s thought. Power is not simply something that institutions and collectives possess. Political power gave people a voice and leads to the development of political liberty and freedom in society. Economic power could give people control over the product of their labour and control over productive forces in the economy.

Economic and Political Power – the development of liberty

When Noah Ablett asked “why cross the river to fill the pail?” he believed that power was at the point of production and that obtaining economic power should be the goal of the workers. Bevan’s conception of economic power meant that he too thought economic power needed to be captured. But the power of the State was so strong that the working class must seek to obtain power through political sources. This did not mean Bevan abandoned his analysis of capitalism and the class antagonisms it created; he saw the two sources of power as being connected and part of the same struggle for the empowerment of the working class.

Bevan’s comments on the development of political liberty stem from his belief that once the economic power of capitalism had increased then people would demand more political power. Bevan’s discussion on the Soviet Union emphasised how he felt societies should develop. Once the economy of the Soviet Union was directed in the public interest, Bevan argued, political liberty would develop in society (Davies 2017). Economic and political power will be given to the people to control their lives (p. 138).

Bevan believed that it was in our human nature to work together. Human nature is “as much co-operative as it is competitive. Indeed, the complicated texture of modern society emphasises over and over again the greater survival value of collective action” (p. 150). He argued for a “system of social priorities” to be set out; society can achieve radical progress through everyone working together. Political power could be used to set out economic goals and develop a system of priorities for everybody. “A civilised society is one that can assimilate radical reforms whilst maintaining its essential stability” (p. 152).

Highlighting the need to use political power to order economic priorities in society, Bevan wrote:

“If full employment is accepted as an aim to be ensued...then we have left the automatism of the competitive capitalist system behind us, and deliberate selection and choice at the communal level must take its place...To promise full employment is to promise the transition from the capitalist system to one where we choose consciously to order the pattern of production and consumption; and the principles we employ in the doing of this must commend themselves to the wishes of a free electorate” (pp.153-154).

To achieve a situation where full employment can be achieved, ensuring peoples’ economic liberty, collective action that utilises the political power of the State was needed to come up with a system of economic priorities. The political power of the State, armed with the economic power necessary to “order the pattern of production and consumption” was vital in creating a new society which adhered to the aims of an electorate possessing political liberty. Public direction of the economy would allow for the creation of economic surplus leading to freedom which Bevan stated “is the by-product of economic surplus”. The achievement of political liberty which emerged as society developed was the highest stage that humans should be aiming for. Economic development, and the creation of this economic-surplus, would lead to freedom “not of national independence, freedom to use one’s own language, and religious liberty” but “the full panoply of political democracy which includes these liberties and others besides” (pp. 39-40). Political power is essential to attaining an economic position in society that emancipates individuals and provides them with liberty.

Bevan’s position on economic and political power can be seen in the following passage:

“The emergence of modern industry, with its danger of de-personalisation of the worker, challenges the vitality of democratic principles. In the societies of the West, industrial democracy is the counterpart of political freedom. Liberty and responsibility march together. They must be joined together in the workshop as in the legislative Assembly. Only when this is accomplished shall we have the foundations of a buoyant and stable civilisation” (p. 105)

Far from abandoning hopes of reorganising the economic life of the workers, Bevan saw democracy as being an essential component of both economic and political power. The different sources of power were to be harnessed together to create the “buoyant and stable civilisation” that he envisioned.

Conclusion

This analysis has provided an overview of economic and political power in Bevan’s political thought. It has shown that Bevan’s conception of economic power focused on the social relations between the working class and the ruling class in capitalist society. Bevan’s thought was focused on praxis: the strategies he believed the working class needed to pursue to achieve power. He believed in the importance of collective action, but whereas trade unionists such as Noah Ablett saw power at the point of production, Bevan saw the capture of political power through the State and through Parliament as being vital to working class strategy.

In Place of Fear has been the focus in this paper but it is only a starting point. To understand Bevan's political thought more fully, there needs to be a significant analysis of Bevan's writings and his work throughout his life and career. This will lead to the identification of continuity, change or theoretical breaks in Bevan's thought. The analysis must also be undertaken alongside the study of military and ideological power.

Nevertheless, this paper has provided an initial overview of key elements of Bevan's thought, demonstrating the importance within it of class empowerment and emancipation. It has also highlighted tensions between industrial and political means of achieving power in Bevan's thought. The question "why cross the river to fill the pail?" strikes at the core of Bevan's conception of power: both economic and political sources.

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