

Designing Democracy: third way political thought, public design, and the politics of uncertainty in Britain's long 1990s

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ABSTRACT

Britain has recently emerged as a global leader in public design, a creative approach to governance in which trained designers, civil servants, and citizens collaborate. This article traces the emergence of public design in Britain by returning to third way political thought. Focusing on the long 1990s (the late 1980s to early 2000s), the article shows how left critics articulated a new political epistemology centred on uncertainty and unpredictability. The new foundation challenged Thatcherism and left progressive teleology alike. Throughout the 1990s, this epistemology informed a conceptual and practical rethinking of democracy in which questions about public participation and new conceptions of state-civil society relations were taken up in three distinct themes: reflexive modernisation, communitarianism, and associationalism. As the broader third way democratic thought narrowed to questions of policy evidence and minor institutional experiments, public design inherited earlier political experimentation, albeit in diminished form. This solidification of third way democratic thought around a simpler set of narratives—both structural and informational—led to its survival beyond New Labour. Although public design represents only one possibility of implementing third way political experiments among many other roads not taken, it highlights a set of core problems of liberal democratic modernity.

KEYWORDS

Third way politics; public design; New Labour; New Times; wicked problems

In the foreword of a 1982 conference programme, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher addressed Britain's vibrant design scene: 'Throughout the world today', she wrote, 'design ought to mean more than attractively finished products'. Indeed, the designers gathering at the Royal College of Art in London that summer played an important interpretive role between 'the customer and the manufacturer' by translating market conditions, the social contexts in which the products intervened, and the materials out of which they were fashioned. Thus, Thatcher stressed that 'design research, education and practice' were 'of great significance to our economic and social well being'.¹

Today, more than four decades later, 'design is everywhere',² most remarkably in government where it is directed towards the 'growing need . . . to adopt new approaches

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to address society's complex problems'.³ Since the turn of the millennium, design practices have moved into governmental spaces from industrial production and business consultancies, a phenomenon which has become known as *public design*.⁴ This global practice has taken hold in countries as diverse as the U.S., Brazil, Chile, Serbia, Singapore, and Australia, among others, and it is often hailed as a tool for collaborative policy making. Since Thatcher's laudation, design has morphed considerably, so much so that today she probably would not have given it her imprimatur. No longer only a tool for producing aesthetically pleasing products, design now addresses a wide array of complex issues from rebuilding resilient infrastructure⁵ to the improvement of public service delivery.⁶ Public design is even invoked as a cure for ailing democratic structures and processes.⁷

Britain has long occupied a central place in the bustling public design community. In the UK and much of Europe, it took shape in the early 2000s, the heyday of third way politics. Tony Blair's New Labour government actively created a favourable environment for its emergence on the governance stage, but the conditions for design's intelligibility in politics were set in the decade prior to New Labour's rise to power. Yet, the entanglement of public design and third way politics has largely been ignored by design history and political history alike, fitting neither category neatly.

This article shows how public design builds on a legacy of third way political thought in which the enactment of left democratic values was reconfigured around a political epistemology of intractable problems, challenging a *fin-de-millénaire* narrative about the end of history. I investigate the political commitments and intentions of British third way thinking which shaped New Labour in its infancy and continued as a critique of its mature state. British third way political discourse constitutes an exemplary site for understanding what forms of politics are opened up or foreclosed in public design today. To understand the UK's key influence on global design-driven public sector innovation, we need to look more closely at the broader debate surrounding British third way politics from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

The development—and eventual disappointment—of New Labour offers a revealing entry point for understanding the political mutations that opened a space for public design. Building on renewed interest in Britain at the turn of the millennium,⁸ I treat the 'long 1990s' (from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, before the financial crisis) as a period of profound democratic reconfiguration. British third way politics and New Labour's ascendancy were accompanied by sustained efforts to rethink left democratic practice⁹ for an era perceived as fundamentally different from that of post-war social democracy. This redefinition of left politics was equally driven by influential intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs. By the late 1990s, however, freewheeling intellectualism gave way to more easily communicable policy goals. Although this narrowing truncated an ambitious democratic debate and pushed experiments with alternative forms of participation to the margins, it nonetheless allowed certain core ideas to persist, albeit in attenuated form and reduced in scope. Having endured sweeping austerity measures within the relative shelter of local government and third-sector innovation labs, public design now re-emerges as one among several vehicles for the democratic reconstruction envisioned by earlier third way thinkers.

Following discursive shifts through individual actors, their institutional anchors, and the heterodox ideas they developed¹⁰ reveals that design practice functioned not only as

a practical means of solving problems. It also served as a crucial *site of problematisation*, where persistent issues of liberal democratic modernity were—and continue to be—articulated. The diversity of sites in which this theoretical and practical experimentation occurred makes it difficult to identify a single cohesive discourse within third way political development. Yet this very plurivocality underscores the value of what Glen O'Hara calls 'kaleidoscopic histories'¹¹—a multiperspectival telling of history that replaces tidy narratives with images in continual motion.

The article begins by mapping some shortcomings of canonical narratives—of New Labour and of design—in which conceptual frames such as neoliberalism often overdetermine analyses. Second, I map out how early third way thinking carved out a distinct political epistemology of ungovernability which undergirded later democratic reconstruction on the political left. Showing the theoretical and practical aspects of three key themes—reflexive modernisation, communitarianism, and associationalism—I explain how the opening of a new political space in the 1990s created the conditions for design's *intelligibility* in government. Third, I trace how New Labour narrowed these ideas, diminishing some of their radicality, around questions of policy evidence. Finally, I describe how in the early aughts design entered government in shielded institutional structures—innovation labs—where it ultimately survived until today.

The article shows that in the long 1990s, democracy was not a settled term. Unearthing this legacy requires paying attention to unusual New Labour figures: policy entrepreneurs, activists, and social theorists who typically stayed in the background behind the more prominent political figureheads and pundits.¹² Luckily, this period also marked the start of born-digital archives which offer a wealth of historical data inaccessible in decades prior.¹³ Accordingly, my sources are diverse, from digital (and digitised) archival records and conventional published material, to online lectures and speeches, aided by personal communication with some key figures.

A note on terminology: I use the terms third way and New Labour to denote distinct contexts. By New Labour, I mean the narrower party programme which drew from a broader discourse both intellectually and operationally (e.g. by recruiting personnel from a third way pool of policy entrepreneurs). By third way—lower-case to steer clear of an overly Giddensian reading—I mean neither a long-standing centrist ideology¹⁴ nor a narrow discourse about renovating social democracy,¹⁵ but rather an historical moment from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, in which established ideas about social democracy were challenged. Following Nikolas Rose's insightful argument, third way politics was 'not exactly a political program' but more 'a certain way of visualizing political problems, a rationality for rendering them thinkable and manageable, and a set of moral principles by which solutions may be generated and legitimized'.¹⁶

Design, neoliberalism, and polyphonic histories

Design history has long understood the UK as an important site for the development of systematic design methods (both artistic and technical), expanding definitions of design, and pioneering design discourses through publications which are still in use today.¹⁷ However, *public design* fits uneasily into these narratives as it does not refer to the styling and form-giving of industrial products but primarily addresses governance problems and the structures or procedures of public administration.¹⁸ Although it echoes older models

of stakeholder participation—its methods are participatory and bring ordinary people into political decision spaces—public design differs in its structuration of collective deliberation processes. Its vast methodological toolkit harkens back to its studio-based origins. Whereas user journeys, scenarios, and personas had previously illuminated frictions in the use of products, they now render visible different perspectives of a policy problem. In collaborative workshops with hands-on modelling (e.g. with Lego bricks, cardboard, or playdoh), ludic techniques tap people's lived experience of governance.

Public designers use their aesthetic training as a new democratic idiom for articulating imaginative processes of 'collective action and experimental doing'.¹⁹ Design orchestrates 'more meaningful public consultation' which 'actively engages those who would not normally participate' in formal democratic processes.²⁰ An *embodied* form of collective deliberation which eludes conventional democratic theory, it encompasses both proceduralist and consequentialist logics. Yet, design methods lend a *technical* structure to the collaboration of ordinary people in problem-framing processes to facilitate what designers understand as a more appropriate resolution of intractable policy problems.

The British public design tradition is particularly robust, offering a privileged perspective on the conditions framing the emergence of design-led governmental innovation even beyond Britain. Because the UK is widely perceived as an 'early innovator and investor in building [design] capabilities', its status as a global 'leader in the use of design in government and policy'²¹ bestows it with enough clout to facilitate the global travel of design. Thus, British and British-trained designers routinely advise foreign governments (e.g. in Latin America) and the EU even after Brexit.²² Given this relative success story, the paucity of scholarship on the emergence of public design is surprising.

Design historians perceive the development of public design as indicative of the market-driven restructuring of public services associated with the rise of social innovation and the social economy in the early 2000s.²³ Guy Julier maps the emergence of public design onto the ascendancy of neoliberalism by drawing a neat line from design-based economic practices to the rise of private sector consultancies and ultimately government.²⁴ Other design scholars have attributed the rise of design in government to the harmful dynamics of neoliberal governmentality.²⁵ Such accounts of public design tend to rely on internalist explanations for its success—such as designers' skill in self-promotion or fluency in neoliberal discourse—while neglecting the complexities of the institutional and political domains in which design operates. Narratives often rely on specious arguments about a neoliberal transformation of the state which enshrined design's success.²⁶

Although designers have indeed actively courted governments and public officials have at times instrumentalised design for competitive advantage in the global economy,²⁷ design's political *intelligibility* should not be taken for granted but must remain an object of sustained inquiry. Assigning too much explanatory weight to the idea of market encroachment as a conduit for design overdetermines neoliberalism as a periodising device while neglecting the limits of such an already overburdened concept.

Reliance on a heavy-handed neoliberal frame for understanding the context in which public design matured is not all that surprising given that political scientists and historians have helped cement this narrative. Thus, it has become commonplace to cast the 1980s and '90s—the period which immediately predated the advent of public design—as one of neoliberal politics²⁸ and to portray New Labour's third way approach, much like

Thatcherism, as complicit with economic neoliberalism.²⁹ Scholars committed to ideological analyses depict a neoliberal era as ‘institutionally hostile’ to solidaristic social forms. With its hegemonic consolidation, neoliberalism even mounted a full attack on ‘the social, cultural, and political conditions underpinning the very possibility of mass democracy’ that came before.³⁰ As this article shows, this characterisation does not quite bear out in the context of third way debates, where solidaristic, democratic, and technical rationalities coexisted and intermingled in far more complex ways. Taking neoliberalism as an ideological hegemon that produced a totalising political project therefore risks obscuring much of what was empirically present.

Such periodisation is admittedly always difficult and patchy, and neoliberalism provides at best partial answers to situated questions.³¹ Thus, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Aled Davies, and Ben Jackson argued that ‘identifying other metanarratives’ about the end of the 20th century remains an important task.³² Like any time period, it was ‘a complex, messy amalgam’³³ of older ideas and discourses, new interpretations, and practices which never fully fit one explanatory model. Some of these heterogeneous elements which today appear quintessential to ‘“neoliberal” Britain were being incubated on the left as well as on the right of politics before 1979’.³⁴ The dissolution of a sense of class was one such example.³⁵

Treating neoliberalism not as a hegemonic political ideology but as a form of problematisation is more fruitful for understanding the discursive formations within which design became intelligible. As Stephen Collier notes, less well-known ‘neoliberals’, such as the American public choice theorist Vincent Ostrom, proposed democratic forms of government grounded in the local political collectives that had characterised the United States since its founding. The point, then, is not primarily to determine how or why third way discourses deemed certain political forms *possible* or *impossible* when measured against neoliberal ideology, but to examine how particular ideas—such as design—became conceptually *thinkable* and institutionally feasible as ‘critical governmental reason’.³⁶ This does not necessarily make design neoliberal, but it does clarify its intelligibility within governments shaped by the intellectual and practical influence of public choice economics.

And so the question remains: how was public design able to emerge so directly from New Labour? The momentous political shift in 1997, which saw the Labour party take over the helm of the British state after 18 years of Tory rule, has rightly directed much critical scholarly attention to Tony Blair’s electoral programme and subsequent policy decisions. Today, evaluations of New Labour vary radically from disappointment among the progressive and far left (who oscillate between feelings of resentment and betrayal) to sober analyses of putatively necessary, albeit distasteful, third way policy choices. Against the growing political disenchantment in the wake of New Labour’s 2010 electoral defeat following the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent introduction of conservative austerity politics,³⁷ critics have produced a sheer endless litany of grievances. Thus, third way ‘politics of depoliticization’ took Britain on a path towards a ‘technocratic form of governance’ which was ‘cloaked in the language of inclusiveness, democratisation and empowerment’.³⁸ New Labour’s efforts at remaking the state by restructuring civil service around new public management ideals are equally perceived as detrimental to democratic norms.³⁹

Even if scholars pick up on New Labour's experiments with new participatory mechanisms, they tend to interpret these 'as a means to efficiency and effectiveness more than as an extension of democracy'.⁴⁰ The forms of participation central to third way thinking, so the story goes, displace deliberative ideals of dialogue in favour of technically framed consultation or even outright pandering. Telling a different story about New Labour's complicated democratic legacy at a time of democratic backsliding is therefore becoming an important scholarly task.

For all the scholarship on New Labour, political history has remained curiously silent on design. This lacuna reflects less on design itself than on how scholars elect to contour their own political present. Certainly, casting public design as an heretofore neglected aspect of New Labour invites the charge of presentist historical revisionism.⁴¹ However, abandoning a singular narrative about British third way politics also opens the door towards hearing different notes in a polyphonic political moment.

This article joins others in making sense of the 'ideological contestation within the late twentieth century left'.⁴² Adopting this perspective reshapes our understanding of the long shadow of 'New Labour's iconoclasm' which has obscured 'complex factional divides' across the political left.⁴³ New Labour's third way politics cannot be reduced to a singular line of thinking neatly contained in the electoral strategies or policy decisions of the Labour Party in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even within New Labour, as Mark Bevir noted, '[c]ompeting positions coexist'.⁴⁴ Though initially small in scale and seemingly peripheral, official investment in and promotion of design should be situated within the broader outlines of the political debates that defined the period. Yet, reading the diversity of British third way thinking in light of public sector design, should not be confused with artificially imposing order on incoherency.

Rather than emphasising a historically unique rupture that voided left politics of its ideological thrust, my aim is to trace a significant reconfiguration within liberal modernity, centred on the epistemic valorisation of lived experience. Such shifts are most discernible in those privileged moments when dominant ideas—such as left democracy—mutate. The contemporary ubiquity of public design in the UK and the role of British design in international advocacy networks render visible the scope of this political mutation.

Understanding public design as part of a longer trajectory of third way politics—one that was neither limited to the UK nor an aberration in most recent *fin-de-millénaire* liberalism—helps us move beyond the tried-and-true analysis of how a social democratic governmental rationality was able to '[render] itself technical'.⁴⁵ In the following, I show that third way thinkers were deeply invested in developing new governmental logics capable of addressing complex, intractable problems and the inherent unpredictability of state intervention. This underscores that democracy is always multiple, and that the search for an authentic or singular democratic form is ultimately misguided. Rather than seeking democratic purity, I propose reading British third way political thought—and its public design legacy—as a distinct tradition of democratic problematisation.

The political epistemology of New Times

Contrary to retrospective impressions, the 1980s were a rich intellectual decade for left thought in which Thatcherism 'was far from completely "triumphant"'.⁴⁶ *Marxism Today* (MT) was among several left journals providing a platform for dissent from left

orthodoxies as well as resistance to the new right.⁴⁷ These vibrant debates were a marker of ongoing dissatisfaction with the conventional political strategies across the left parties. As I show in this section, a group of MT authors—many of whom young and frustrated with the left's ongoing electoral malaise—developed an alternative political epistemology built on ideas of future uncertainty. This epistemological foundation later shaped third way thinking about the role of the state and the practice of democracy.

In a much-discussed seminar and subsequent publication series, Stuart Hall and MT's editor-in-chief Martin Jacques convened a broad debate about *New Times*,⁴⁸ which marked a rupture in left thought and prompted efforts to establish a new foundation for social democracy. The authors perceived the continued reliance on working class constituencies through trade unions and a focus on redistributive tax policies as deeply anachronistic at a time when traditional notions of political belonging such as class or place of birth rapidly disintegrated. They ruminated that the new political right behind Thatcherism had grasped something fundamental about the dynamics of social change at the end of the century: a new centrality of individualism in which 'individuals [were] becoming agents to change their worlds'.⁴⁹ Without trying to simply replicate Thatcherite ideas, critics remarked that Thatcherism had discerned a trend in British society which the organised left had roundly ignored.⁵⁰

Recently heralded as a 'vibrant moment' in which 'the "facelessness" of traditional social democracy'⁵¹ was challenged, the *New Times* debate created a space for theoretical and practical rethinking of left democracy. In their introduction to the eponymous book, Hall and Jacques contended that the left had become 'doctrinally fixed'⁵² to an epistemology of certainty that was no longer fit for a world 'increasingly characterised by diversity, differentiation and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardisation'.⁵³ The 'Old Left's'⁵⁴ intellectual and policy arsenal had 'impose[d] simple structures onto a complex reality'⁵⁵ and had slowly 'lost touch with change and the world outside of itself'.⁵⁶

The idea of 'new times' catalysed politically critical thinking about the limits of left ideologies. MT authors distanced themselves from ideological convictions grounded in determinist narratives about the future. They advanced an alternate temporal imaginary predicated on indeterminacy in which the future was not easily extrapolated from past data. This foreclosure of prediction effectively precluded teleological certainty and frustrated a conception of progress as a 'clear, linear, rational path to the future' capable of 'imposing order upon an unruly world'.⁵⁷ Consequently, a politics which accorded 'elite technocrats a special authoritative place' in modern governments as 'the producers and guardians of progress' was 'no longer tenable'.⁵⁸

Technical and scientific experts could not be expected to 'read off individual interests from larger collective interests'.⁵⁹ A serious engagement with dynamic individualism entailed accepting that individuals and their chosen social affiliations were not readily observable from afar. In other words, social change, the endless differentiation of society, was increasingly understood as opaque: neither immediately given to the analytical frameworks of social theory nor to the 'quantitative' methods of rational 'planners, technocrats, [and] scientists'.⁶⁰ Far from a turn towards technocratic futures,⁶¹ the *New Times* debate pointed to the limits of available left diagnostic tools for making sense of social change. Social opacity combined with the demotion of scientific experts paved the way for the direct inclusion of these active individuals into politics.

MT's *New Times* critics moulded a discussion of the absolute limits to governmental knowledge into a new political epistemology that challenged not only Thatcherism but also the role of the left in a world in which governmental problems were often 'unstable and uncontrollable'.⁶² Indeed, as Geoff Mulgan wrote, it was impossible 'to be certain which particular means will lead to what ends, or that today's solutions will not turn out to be tomorrow's problems'.⁶³ This move displaced a Thatcherite success story and opened up a more general problematisation of democratic modernity and its ability to deal with recurring intractable governmental problems. In this light, Thatcher's 'rather simple ... set of remedies', such as 'monetary restraint and public spending cuts, privatisation and union reform'⁶⁴ were not only morally deplorable but *epistemologically deficient*. As Mulgan reasoned, when it came to accounting for social change, the mechanisms of privatisation and market-style competition had 'proved no better at defining ... the boundaries of the public sector' than the static socialist notion of class.⁶⁵ Much like traditionally left conceptions of scientifically determinable progress, Thatcherite policy was undergirded by an ideology that ultimately required a logically impossible 'world of perfect information'.⁶⁶

In the early 1990s, the left's party platforms were deracinated by more than a decade of Thatcherism's electoral success and the breakdown of state socialism across eastern Europe. Yet, this opportune moment of critical self-reflection opened the door for 'a pragmatic adjustment by the Left to the collapse of its various previous visions and a failure to generate its own new historic project'.⁶⁷ In these new times, the left was no longer the keeper of a world-historical vision but had to reinvent itself in the image of 'a warning system'⁶⁸ – a problematiser and sceptic—tasked with identifying the internal contradictions of modern government. As David Miliband remarked, 'the Left retains its distinctive place in politics today not because of its utopian vision of the future, but by virtue ... of its critique of the present'.⁶⁹ Recasting the left as a troublemaker opened up a space for rethinking formal and informal political practices, both theoretically and organisationally.

When MT folded in 1991, many young *New Times* intellectuals sought other venues to secure political influence. In the early 1990s, the Labour party itself offered scant opportunities for creative new approaches. As Neil Kinnock's more conventional programme drove the 1992 Labour campaign towards a much-debated loss against John Major's Tories,⁷⁰ the critical *New Times* voices carried on regardless.

In 1993, Mulgan and Jacques, founded a new think tank evocatively called Demos which became a nursery for creative third way political thought. It quickly grew into a key organisation for developing alternative ideas for restructuring the public sector and reconfiguring democracy to fit a *New Times* political epistemology.⁷¹ Created to be both cross-sectoral and trans-ideological, Mulgan, who became Demos' first direction, thought of it as an action-oriented incubator for a new governmental approach.⁷² However, in contrast to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the more traditional Labour think tank,⁷³ Demos was not (primarily) in the business of supplying the party with concrete policy proposals. It also offered a space for integrating social theory and programmes developed by grassroots activists or planning practitioners, thus compiling a whole range of conceptual and practical tools. Despite its insistence on existing beyond the left–right political binary, it was precisely the kind of entity required for the work of left political problematisation.

Demos shifted the debate from a problem of the left towards a broader ‘crisis of governability’⁷⁴ in which the end of the millennium marked an important watershed moment for democratic politics. This position contrasted sharply with the putative ‘end of history’⁷⁵ which defined the political mood across much of Europe in the early 1990s. In this political climate, returning to a long-standing problem of governing modern states was not only acknowledging the intellectual precursors of the New Times debate. It also afforded a discursive reframing of the demise of state socialism across Eastern Europe as part of a longer series of governmental crises—climate change, social security, demographic shifts, recessions—that continued to bedevil the modern state even after the end of the Cold War. Demos contributors highlighted the persistence of such crises and mobilised ideas of ungovernability and ‘governmental “overload”’,⁷⁶ diagnostics that were in circulation since the 1970s. Calling attention to the ‘spectre of ungovernability’ that had long ‘haunted the modern state’⁷⁷ implicitly invoked state-crisis theories, according to which irrationalisation of crisis management or a democratic demand spiral made it increasingly harder for the state to carry out its role.⁷⁸ Demos researchers such as Mulgan saw themselves as responding to a reality with ‘far too many variables’ and ‘far too many complexities’ for governments to act ‘as controllers of society, in charge of a rational machine’.⁷⁹

The new political epistemology and its appeal to ungovernability was nowhere epitomised as clearly as in the term ‘wicked problems’ which began to circulate among Demos researchers in the mid 1990s. Originally defined in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the German mathematician and planning theorist Horst Rittel,⁸⁰ wicked problems drew attention to the intractability of problem definition and later served as an indictment of linear or rational forms of planning and policy making. The term denoted not only the attenuation of expert knowledge in the face of intractable problems. It also emphasised the importance of lived experience and perspectival knowledge in planning.⁸¹ The idea of wicked problems offered a welcome critique of policy making but also justified democratic reconstruction. Hewing close to the original definition, policy scholars Michael Clarke and John Stewart argued that ‘wicked problems’ indexed those ‘intractable problems which seem difficult or impossible for governments to solve *and yet which they have to face*’.⁸² This conceptual model moved the New Times debate into a different register. More than supporting arguments for governmental reforms,⁸³ the heavily democratic subtext of wicked problems supported ‘a participatory style of governing’.⁸⁴

Although scholars have noted the centrality of complexity to early New Labour,⁸⁵ the pivotal role of this political epistemology in fundamentally rethinking democracy remains undertheorised. This lacuna makes it difficult to discern the shift from ‘the widely diagnosed “crisis of politics”’ to a more specific engagement with democratic reconstruction. Though a considerable part of third way thinking addressed public sector reforms, the debate was never ‘confined to technical problems of organization’.⁸⁶ The New Times debate had primed an incipient participatory turn in third way political thinking which afforded a renewed emphasis on direct citizen involvement: ‘can new democratic institutions be wedded to processes which tap the informed judgment of the electorate?’⁸⁷ These democratic questions would

become focal points of a broader discussion throughout the 1990s and fostered a new experimentality with democratic forms.

Rethinking democracy for New Times

Demos researchers were careful not to naturalise an idea of direct democracy. Certainly, the 'growing commitment to participation' was not easily squared with conventional representative democracy 'in narrow terms of party advantage and office-seeking'.⁸⁸ But, the rising 'demand for more engagement in decisions, and more scope for direct influence',⁸⁹ was also running up against the practical shortcomings of participatory democracy in complex modern states. As Mulgan had argued since the late 1980s, a model of democratic participation sensitive to wicked problems had to take seriously that 'most people limit the time they devote to participating in democratic structures'. Indeed, democracy was no more 'a universal panacea than the market'. He lamented an uncomfortable reality in which 'democratic structures that demand intensive participation often prove unstable', and not only because 'self-appointed cliques ... effectively disenfranchise those unable or unwilling to participate'.⁹⁰

Democracy as an object of problematisation highlighted the friction between theoretical frameworks and practical enactment.⁹¹ More than just a question of first principles, democracy was also a *technical challenge* of reconciling the existing 'machinery of government'⁹² with the growing demand for the inclusion of ordinary citizens in decision-making. Third way thinkers exposed weaknesses in maximalist notions of democracy which ignored ineluctable institutional path-dependencies and the social cost of participation. Treating participation as neither self-evident nor spontaneous made a more instrumental orchestration of participatory forums necessary, but it also required new *conceptual* guidelines as this section will explore.

The new political epistemology that had emerged around the New Times debate afforded both theoretical and practical responses and appealed to policy entrepreneurs as much as the European social theory clerisy. Although Anthony Giddens is often taken as the paradigmatic third way voice,⁹³ Colm Murphy reminds us that 'scholars can overstate the political importance of some especially noisy thinkers'.⁹⁴ At the same time, mapping the connections between social theory and practice is helpful for understanding the mutations of left democracy that occurred in this moment of conceptual and practical openness. This is not to suggest that theory drove change. Rather, there were important resonances of ideas across theoretical and practical discourses—'more echoes ... than direct influence'⁹⁵—clustered around three important themes: reflexive modernisation, communitarianism, and associationalism. Though distinct theoretical traditions, their ideas were inextricably entangled in the shifting and always provisional practico-conceptual edifice of third way thought.

Adopting these conceptual frameworks into practical work—either through direct appeals to theory or through resonances—was never as theoretically sophisticated as scholarly debates, but that was hardly the point. The goal was not theoretical rigour but carving out new areas of democratic experimentation in which the state took on different roles. Theoretical frameworks aided in articulating a practical 'field of adversity'.⁹⁶ Social entrepreneurs such as Mulgan and think tanks like Demos acted as important conduits for such resonances, commissioning new research and facilitating these exchanges.⁹⁷

Engaging with the indexical theories of reflexive modernisation, communitarianism, and associationalism helps to us understand how the kind of third way democratic thinking which built on the epistemology of New Times ultimately created the conditions for public design's intelligibility in politics. These theories are indexical not because they served as lodestars for democratic change, but because they help identify the specific frameworks through which the new political epistemology made general problems of democratic organisation practically thinkable.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck had coined the term reflexive modernisation in his seminal 1986 book *Risk Society* which was widely cited among third way thinkers. In the late 1980s, Beck had perceptively remarked that 'the implosion of the East' was followed by 'something like a "gutting of the political" in the West',⁹⁸ freeing up space for a new understanding of politics in which the 'political programme of radicalised modernity is scepticism'.⁹⁹ The idea of reflexive modernisation described the radicalisation of modernity in which the modern state 'begins to transform', adapting 'not only the key institutions but also the very principles of ... modern society' to the pressures of self-imposed risk.¹⁰⁰ The ever more visible internal contradiction of modernity created a space for new social movements and regular citizens to *contest* the political authority of governments which failed to handle the spillover crises of industrialisation. The pressure of growing contestation required the modern state to engage directly with the environmental, organisational, and societal consequences of first (industrial) modernisation.

In the mid-1990s, while a visiting scholar at the London School of Economics, Beck was a regular visitor at Demos.¹⁰¹ During this time, he continued to develop the idea of reflexive modernisation. Now foregrounding the 'demonopolization of expertise',¹⁰² he signalled also the possibility of 'shaping society *from below*'. Beck reaffirmed the importance of such 'sub-politics',¹⁰³ a space for political discussion outside of the state. This '(re) *invention* of the political'¹⁰⁴ delegitimised a 'nation-state concept of democracy' in which elections were little more than a 'wrestling match of parties over the feed troughs and levers of power'.¹⁰⁵ The philosopher Zygmunt Baumann, citing Beck, wrote in a Demos pamphlet that a new democratic ethics had to build on the realisation that 'uncertainty is not a temporary nuisance, which can be chased away through learning the rules, or surrendering to expert advice, or just doing what others do. Instead, it is a permanent condition of life'.¹⁰⁶ A Beckian frame foregrounded the imperative of accommodating contestation of modernity's unintended consequences.

As Beck's Demos interlocutor, Mulgan, wrote 'the weakening of formal politics' resulted from new 'political modes of questioning and argument' which were becoming omnipresent in 'all realms of life'. Indeed, the possibility of restructuring 'modern democratic politics' depended on this ubiquity of 'contestation and questioning',¹⁰⁷ in which ordinary citizens were challenging the supposed self-evidence of governmental authority. This newly contestatory political life heralded the prospect of a 'dialogic democracy',¹⁰⁸ that allowed 'a more reflexive citizenry' entry into political decisions.¹⁰⁹ Yet, the proliferation of a sceptical disposition among the citizens also necessitated rethinking the *technical means* for enabling contestation on a society-wide scale. Beck, like Demos' third way thinkers, called for experimentation 'with novel procedures, decision-making structures, overlaps of competence and incompetence and multiple jurisdictions'.¹¹⁰

Adding 'direct mechanisms to representative democracy'¹¹¹ sounded good in the abstract but the specific modalities of collective ownership of decisions and the

concrete structuring of participation was a matter of considerable debate. Third way thinkers began toying with models such as the recently invented 'deliberative poll',¹¹² 'citizens' juries', 'mediation groups', 'community forums' or 'stakeholder conferences' as well as 'new forms of public meetings designed to enable discussion in groups'.¹¹³ John Stewart, who had co-authored the publication that had introduced the idea of wicked problems into third way thinking, even advised the House of Commons during the first Blair administration on the question of democratic innovation.¹¹⁴ This discourse was fundamentally oriented towards spaces, procedures, and practices in which 'different perspectives can be explored and new understandings developed'.¹¹⁵

But politics was irreducible to the readily contesting individual. In the absence of class consciousness, political collectivities became an object of concern. The popular discourses around community and communitarian ethics offered a different language for rearticulating collective identity. Several commentators have since noted the relative importance of communitarianism in third way political thought.¹¹⁶ Yet, they often overemphasise the influence of communitarian theorists such as Amitai Etzioni¹¹⁷ in shaping 'a kind of natural, extra-political zone of human relations'¹¹⁸ in which social groupings have 'fixed identities or shared values'.¹¹⁹ While these assessments may not be entirely wrong for American communitarianism, reading communitarian thought as a guide for British third way political discourse is misleading. Baumann, for instance, was explicit about his critique of a retrograde idea of natural community. He insisted that 'no foolproof methods' existed which could guarantee that 'such a community will indeed be built' in the way communitarians envisioned it.¹²⁰ Mulgan warned that 'in its socially conservative guise, where community is used as a codeword for shoring up older institutions that can no longer either win legitimacy or deliver', communitarianism 'may divide far more than it unites'.¹²¹ Third way thinkers were fully aware that most 'conditions for traditional communities—deference, social homogeneity, immobility—have disappeared'.¹²²

And yet, communitarianism held a certain appeal. First, the idea of community—not as a naturalised entity but as a model for a collective political actor—framed a social body below the national scale, holding diverse values but also common interests. It spoke back to and decentred a public choice methodological individualism, 'overturning the dominant economic view that individuals are only selfish, materially motivated and separate'.¹²³ Taking seriously that communities functioned as *collective* political entities, also meant recognising the geographic and social situatedness of most wicked problems. This problem-orientation demanded that government 'has missions—real tasks by which it is judged'.¹²⁴

Second, communitarianism also served as 'a way of bringing ethics back into the mainstream'.¹²⁵ Indeed, 'autonomous, morally self-sustained and self-governed (often therefore unwieldy and awkward) citizens' were always intertwined with 'a fully-fledged, self-reflective and self-correcting political community'.¹²⁶ Affirming this entanglement of individual and collective political actors opened a path towards thinking about a new model of governance. In order to cohere as collectivities, communities—'either geographical ones or communities of interest'—sometimes required intervention, that is, creating the necessary preconditions for acting collectively.¹²⁷ Such 'softer forms [of] communitarianism'¹²⁸ encouraged government to 'act in partnership with agencies in civil society' and 'to foster

community renewal and development'.¹²⁹ The framework of 'social innovation' channelled a form of intervention in which 'social entrepreneurs'¹³⁰ occupied an increasingly prominent role. But social innovation required all manner of framing conditions from 'legislation that defines a set of building blocks from which each project can design the organizational form appropriate to their needs'¹³¹ to looser ideas such as 'setting a climate' within government and defining 'the details of policy mechanisms'. Whatever the form, government was 'well-placed to influence a shift in behaviour towards much greater engagement in the community'.¹³²

As third way thinkers began to consider the various connections between government and communities, associationalism offered a useful organisational model. Popularised by Paul Hirst in his seminal book *Associative Democracy*, the associationalist framework drew attention to the importance of 'evaluating existing institutional settings and designing new ones' without losing sight of 'the different requirements of the huge diversity of goods and services in the different societal fields'.¹³³ It offered 'a principle of administrative renewal'¹³⁴ by focusing on and enabling 'alternative arrangements of markets, hierarchies, networks and associations'.¹³⁵

Like Beck, Hirst had a considerable presence in third way discourses, and his ideas similarly resonated with older aspects of the New Times debate.¹³⁶ MT contributor and Demos researcher Charles Leadbeater had written in the 1980s that the left needed to 'focus on the creation of autonomous collectives, outside the state' as a strategy for recognising and fostering 'individuality, diversity and plurality in civil society'.¹³⁷ By the mid-1990s, 'a renaissance of the civic'¹³⁸ offered some directions as to what an approach to institutional restructuring might look like. Politics in 'the modern world' was marked by 'the rise of associations' for governing everyday life.¹³⁹ At a time when 'many existing institutions are showing signs of strain', community and voluntary associations became an integral part of a systemic response to the 'many social problems such as social cohesion, jobs creation, inner-city decay and youth unemployment' which were 'resistant to orthodox solutions'.¹⁴⁰ In an interwoven political sphere in which the state and civil society were mutually constitutive, democratic politics had to accommodate 'a spectrum of ways' for people to contribute to a common interest and participate in 'associations to achieve change'.¹⁴¹

This kind of governmental logic saw the whole political field as a more or less dense web of 'joined-up governance'.¹⁴² As a node in a network of quasi self-governing agents, government proper was conceived as a mediator responsible for enabling information flows. This reticulated understanding of governing connected 'the immediacy of local learning with the synoptic capacity of the centre'.¹⁴³ The state, thus, had an important coordinating role to play in an associative model. Because it was impossible to discern which 'good intentions generate unintended consequences',¹⁴⁴ government institutions had to learn and adapt to this new model of democracy, addressing wicked problems 'through an iterative process—learning, trying and learning'.¹⁴⁵

Mapping these intellectual traditions in a third way community of practice reveals rare instances of imbrication between social theory and political practice. The convergences and affinities between theoretical and practical debates at the time highlight how the political epistemology of New Times elicited discussions about the *technical demands* of democratic reform. Such debates, though certainly experimental, and sometimes

speculative, should not be misinterpreted as utopian. They took seriously the reality of institutional and procedural path-dependence while also thinking about possibilities of change.

New regimes of evidence

After New Labour's electoral success in 1997, third way luminaries like Geoff Mulgan and Charles Leadbeater took up positions in Tony Blair's administration. This political access positioned them to translate some of the previous conceptual work in more concrete and tangible ways. In this section, I show how a new proximity to the centres of power did not only afford greater leverage to implement change but also confronted them with the constraints that come with actually having to govern. As expansive third way political thinking became more muted, new questions coalesced around the institutionally safer issue of policy evidence.

Several new policy units in the Cabinet Office began implementing ideas developed earlier. One such entity was the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), which Mulgan helped set up in 1997. It offered a mission-driven approach capable of dealing with the "'joined-up" nature of social problems'.¹⁴⁶ It required, as Mulgan later recalled, 'tapping into everyday collective intelligence'.¹⁴⁷ The SEU was not only working across Whitehall, it also consulted 'widely with local authorities, business, the voluntary sector, faith groups and other agencies, and people who have a direct experience of social exclusion'.¹⁴⁸ Associationalist frames such as joined-up governance and a communitarian focus on the lived experience of community members affected by social exclusion highlighted that government 'policies were not as effective at tackling social problems as they could have been'.¹⁴⁹

One reason for this reduction in the scope of third way thinking was certainly the reality of the massive policy burden all administrations inherit.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, initiatives such as the SEU rendered visible a low structural capacity for 'working with—and learning from—external partners such as local government . . . and communities'.¹⁵¹ The uniquely wicked problem of social exclusion connected to all kinds of other issues 'such as, for example, unemployment, poor skills, high crime, poor housing and family breakdown. Only when these links are properly understood and addressed will policies really be effective'. Along with the notion of co-production—collaborative knowledge production and policy implementation—such units introduced qualitative methods in which the input from 'people who have direct experience of social exclusion'¹⁵² became key sources for policy information. The spotlight on such *communities of the affected* underscores an ongoing communitarian commitment. Its new evidentiary regime, which focused on lived experience as a key epistemological category, created spaces for emerging practices such as design.

By the late 1990s, design was already playing a role in the cultural-economic messaging of the Cool Britannia campaign,¹⁵³ where the styling and form-giving of British industrial products contributed to new debates about British identity and competitiveness in a globally connected market.¹⁵⁴ But design's business vernacular was not yet intelligible as a policy tool. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the British Design Council, an organisation which had been founded in the 1940s to advance the industrial interest of the UK, explicitly began to promote design practice as a framework that fit the political epistemology of New Times.

Simultaneously, a procedural turn had primed design for its expanded responsibility, opening the door to anthropologists and psychologists who brought with them a set of qualitative methods for collaborative decision-making.¹⁵⁵ These new design methods aimed at 'identifying the prospective users'¹⁵⁶ and introduced useful 'tools and techniques' that would enable their 'full participation'.¹⁵⁷ They promised 'a way of *envisioning and experiencing*' a certain problem and enabled designers to collaborate with a range of stakeholders in a process of 'joint exploration'.¹⁵⁸ No longer just 'makers' of aesthetically pleasing products with fixed functions, designers engaged with a 'problematic situation' by generating 'visions about the future'. But in this new role, they had to worry about 'how these visions can be realized'¹⁵⁹ and develop the skill 'to set up the process' in which 'everyone gets something out of the interaction'.¹⁶⁰

This major shift redefined design from a traditional studio-based practice to a set of organisational and problem-solving procedures. The new participatory idiom fit snugly into a third way approach in which it came to signify a specific process of political assembly—the formation of temporary publics—and the deliberation about controversial problems by dint of embodied and interactive methods. In speaking the same language as New Labour's Modernising Government frame, design cannily answered concerns about the downsides of conventional democratic participation such as people's limited time and capacity or steamrolling organisational costs. Charles Leadbeater quipped, '[o]nly policy wonks think people will be excited by attending more meetings'.¹⁶¹

As part of a Design Council project that worked with government, Leadbeater and the designer Hilary Cottam identified the 'creative and interactive process' of design as a key strategy for tackling complex problems. They contended that its co-creative approach brought together 'professional and local expertise' in a way that 'challenges the views of all parties'.¹⁶² In this process 'anomalies and contradictions as well as patterns and averages'¹⁶³ had a place. The participatory approach of co-design was not a 'one off event' and compared neither to 'a referendum in which the community decides what should be done' nor to processes of 'formal consultation in which professionals give users a chance to voice their views on a limited number of alternatives'.¹⁶⁴ For Cottam and Leadbeater, design offered 'a set of techniques' for translating multiple different forms of knowledge, including 'latent perceptions and emotional responses', into useful policy information which could travel 'across traditional institutional boundaries and hierarchies'. In this way, design was a 'process that makes connections ... between people and organisations'.¹⁶⁵

The link between latent democratic demands and policy evidence shows an evolved understanding of a third way problematisation of democracy. In the early 2000s, a Demos pamphlet argued that a maximalist demand for public participation, while 'rhetorically appealing',¹⁶⁶ lacked substance. Far from invoking populist rhetoric, the new evidentiary regime brought together 'different people and perspectives' in a 'new model of expertise'¹⁶⁷ which incorporated the lived experience of non-experts, in a way that was 'provisional', always remaining 'exploratory' and 'adaptive'.¹⁶⁸ Design followed this model. Its informational paradigm grounded not in scientific data but the participation of affected people with perspectival knowledge of a wicked problem.

Design's ability to render visible user experience of a product or service could be redirected towards the problems arising from living in a polity, information that was not immediately given but had to be translated. As design methods began tapping into

a 'goldmine of data',¹⁶⁹ they also deployed *communicative formats* that captured and represented this information in appropriate ways. Design's narrativistic approach—employing personas, storytelling, or material prototypes—demonstrated that the specific experience of, say, single parenthood or living with diabetes did not easily fit into the primarily quantitative methodological toolkit of policy analysis. Visual representations brought an informational aesthetic that made the contents more accessible even for people who were not trained civil servants. More than slick graphics, this visual work was messy and captured the patchy nature of diverse perspectives. While participation became a tool for information capture, designers' aesthetic training formatted this situated knowledge so it could flow into political decisions. Design methods to some extent afforded more granularity for understanding individual needs, but its inherently synthetic process also abstracted from the incommensurabilities that necessarily characterise sociohistorical experiences.¹⁷⁰ At the same time, design's regime of evidence expanded what counts as politically relevant knowledge; it proposed a new 'site of veridiction',¹⁷¹ where the appropriateness of governmental practice could be judged by new standards.

While co-design spoke to a communitarian idiom of collective political subjectivity, the *informational value* of communities took centre stage.¹⁷² As Leadbeater remarked, in contrast to the abstract idea of citizenship which was 'too vague and distant to offer any real prospect' for political belonging,¹⁷³ co-design promised to create a 'connection between the individual and the collective'.¹⁷⁴ Overly instrumental though it may seem, reconceiving participation in the informational terms of policy evidence spotlighted a very real problem for modern democratic states, that of linking a dynamic social body to a government responsible for its care.

The rise of design labs

The assumption among third way thinkers like Leadbeater that it was the 'state's job ... to orchestrate and enable [a] process' for 'allowing the public good to emerge from within civil society',¹⁷⁵ was not *just* an epistemological question about policy evidence. It was also a matter of organisation. In a co-authored government white paper, Mulgan, who served as the head of Blair's Strategy Unit, singled out design—industrial design, urban design, and architecture—as a productive site for experimentation with 'reasoned and deliberative processes'.¹⁷⁶ The politically salient language of public value, a language design spoke well, had introduced a 'broader measure than is conventionally used' to describe the 'value *added* by government'. It encapsulated an attempt to measure something that was hard to measure—or even fundamentally unmeasurable. That is, the value of public life 'defined by the public themselves'.¹⁷⁷ But the hopes that 'designing for value' would lead to 'increased opportunities for democratic participation and engagement',¹⁷⁸ ran up against some of the 'structural weaknesses in Whitehall's ways of working, such as the difficulty of joining-up policies across departments'.¹⁷⁹ This section explores how design, now eminently intelligible within the public value frame, formed discrete innovation pockets within government in which it matured—and became confined.

New organisational forms such as the Social Exclusion Unit or the Strategy Unit were creating public value by showing how to structure joined-up governance. Thus, they laid the groundwork for a new organisational model: the innovation lab. Labs provided

a welcome incubation chamber not only for design but also for a lingering third way associationalism, now refracted through the prism of public value. This kind of safe but self-contained space for experimenting with governance reform sidestepped the need to justify large expenditures of taxpayer monies which helped to legitimise public design in the early period.

At the same time, the frame of public value opened a pool of financial support for new programmes and organisations which benefited the creative sector.¹⁸⁰ Dipping into these funding schemes, the Design Council set up an innovation lab called RED, a 'do tank' for developing 'innovative thinking and practice on social and economic problems through design innovation'.¹⁸¹ Headed by Hilary Cottam, its members included, among others, Charles Leadbeater—who had already contributed to the new times debate in MT and had been a Demos research associate before advising Tony Blair's Policy Unit—and Colin Burns who came with 15 years of experience at the American consulting giant IDEO.¹⁸² RED's core strategy explicitly framed design as a participatory response to wicked problems, which mobilised plural forms of knowledge.¹⁸³

The organisation supported different research projects and was in frequent contact with political officials from both parties (such as Ed Miliband and David Cameron). Tellingly, the RED Unit's first project in 2004 was titled 'Touching the State', a collaboration with the IPPR. Endorsed by then-home secretary David Blunkett, the project traced the qualitative connections of citizens with the state and problematised aspects of British democracy perceived as insufficiently sensitive to citizens' experience. RED researchers developed qualitative data intended to show the friction that emerged acutely when citizens and government came into contact, such as during elections or as part of public services. They argued that it was impossible to 'gain insight into the real lives of users of public services by reading about them in research reports'. By virtue of being 'a rapid, iterative process that can adapt to changing circumstances',¹⁸⁴ design produced what they deemed more appropriate information about a dynamic social world. Thus, such innovation labs affirmed and solidified the new regime of evidence.

RED was enormously successful at establishing design as a legitimate political tool. It offered a model for experimenting with governance reform without engaging in risky large-scale structural overhaul. In the early aughts, this model was readily adapted in the British local government landscape. Kent Council was an early adopter which became home to one of the UK's first government innovation labs, the Social Innovation Lab Kent (SILK). Demos researcher Sophia Parker, who had worked with Cottam at the Design Council, helped create the organisation following a RED project.¹⁸⁵ As a former civil servant in the Blair government, Parker had experience with the shortcomings of conventional policymaking firsthand. Displacing the NPM numbers game with the qualitative approach of design, SILK began working on concrete problems such as dementia or male parenting.¹⁸⁶ As the 'new localism' of devolution required councils to invest in a new 'organisational infrastructure'¹⁸⁷ to help them deal with the demand of creating and delivering public services, labs such as SILK emphasised *the local* as the privileged scale for design-based third way governance. Not only was it easier to create innovation labs at the local level—one only needed a committed council leader¹⁸⁸—the local was also where results could be observed most immediately. But this primacy of the local made it harder to engage with large, system-level, and national scale reform.

As public design continued to spread, enabled to a large extent by the increasingly dense web of public-design advocacy groups in which the early third way thinkers continued to play a key role,¹⁸⁹ labs became the paradigmatic organisational form for government innovation. Although the financial crisis and austerity politics eventually capped the public value slush fund, investments in design-based social innovation created sufficient momentum to sustain it even beyond New Labour years. Today we see the longevity of a third way political legacy in such developments as the UK Policy Lab in the central government, established in 2014 under Tory rule.¹⁹⁰ And yet, after two decades, these design labs still struggle for wider acceptance.

On the one hand, the lab structure—being just small enough to run without much cost while upholding the Modernising Government narrative—helped protect design even beyond New Labour. Labs shielded uncomfortable ideas and practices from potentially unfavourable political conditions. On the other hand, they also kept somewhat radical ideas contained in small and often inconsequential spaces where they could not deal much damage to the broader political landscape.

Political survival in unfavourable times

Historical research on public design is still in its infancy, and this story will most assuredly be complicated in the future. For now, we should see design in government and indeed the legacy of third way thinking as contingent political formations the emergence of which in Britain was neither inevitable after New Labour nor foretold by neoliberalism. Yet, questions remain: Why design? Why not other models of direct citizen involvement that had been floated since the 1990s? Deliberative democracy, for instance, which was also hotly debated at the time, offered much more far-reaching and radical possibilities for including people in policymaking.¹⁹¹ While design rightly appears as a political lightweight by comparison—fewer participants, often dubious selection criteria, and without much opportunity for overt contestation—it was also easier to organise and implement than the more demanding deliberative formats. In short, it offered a different ratio of public costs and benefits and fit into a pragmatist frame of third way politics.¹⁹² Moreover, design was complexly tied to all three currents of third way democratic thought. All this speaks more to the robustness of public design's democratic technologies in the face of political turbulence than it does to its democratic authenticity.

At least in the first few years, designers were able to fit into the existing governmental machinery without making too much of a fuss. While deliberative democratic experiments were conducted in parallel with design (indeed their influence has grown in recent years), it was comparably easy for designers to work within 'the untidiness of policy'. After all, 'uncertainty isn't just about the limits of knowledge'.¹⁹³ It also presents an organisational problem. As design's new evidence regime spoke to New Labour's narrative of 'what works',¹⁹⁴ labs offered a rarefied environment for demonstrating its efficacy. In other words, public design was able to accommodate itself with a governmental system in which political leadership was subject to change and where elected officials could slash funding from one year to the next. Being less radical, less broadly participatory, and less challenging to existing structures had its perks when it came to political survival. Precisely because it was modest while still embodying some of the democratic values of third way politics, design was able to become and remain a staple in the UK government.

This history of public design's third way legacy is not intended to negate other histories of New Labour. But it does render them partial and always incomplete. I have told two entangled narratives about a democratic tradition among British third way thinkers that has so far gone underappreciated. The first is a story about openings. Here, the new political epistemology, first developed during the New Times debate, opened up an expansive political space for critical reflection on and experimentation with democratic models capable of navigating these new epistemic constraints. The second story is one of diminution. After a period of openness, during which diverse thinkers and practitioners exchanged political visions, experimentality reduced. The focus turned to rethinking evidence regimes and building modest structures in which third way democratic thought later endured unfavourable political conditions.

Although a reduction in scope, this move should neither be understood as a failure nor an instrumental prioritisation of evidence over deliberation. Design certainly spotlighted some information while backgrounding or even disregarding other knowledge—a truism for any practice. Although this informational emphasis to some extent transmogrified a third way problematisation of political truth, the role of the troublemaker was never abandoned. Design contests, not always explicitly, what counts as true political knowledge, who gets to determine specific sites of veridiction, and what modalities of truth production are appropriate for wicked problems. That is not nothing. Rather, the survival of public design and its global importance today shows that these ideas continue to resonate, albeit perhaps without carrying the same kind of radical valence they had in the long 1990s. Both stories—one about radical democratic revisioning and one about pragmatic adjustment to existing constraints—can be true at the same time. Both interpretations show that the goal of rethinking left democracy had to deal with a breadth of often incommensurable ideas as well as a grapple with the reality of governmental path-dependency in which political problematisation was often severely hamstrung.

As New Labour was gradually 'downgraded to an election campaign machine',¹⁹⁵ a deradicalisation that had already begun during the 1997 campaign when Labour Party leadership reduced innovative ideas to easily communicable soundbites,¹⁹⁶ the withdrawal from political experimentalism channelled creative energies into other outlets. Yet, it would be wrong to classify public design as New Labour's epigone. As a somewhat strange interloper, design also had agency. Its political outsider status made it possible to keep experimenting. By contrast, third way thinkers who had taken positions in government were now politically accountable and thus had to abide by existing governmental rules. At the same time, designers instrumentalised their new access to the levers of power to promote themselves and their practice. While the advent of public design perhaps foreclosed the most radical potential of third way political thought and the hopes for a more diverse democracy, including giving more space to public contestation, we should not therefore understand the rise of design as evidence of neoliberal hegemony. Instead, it highlights the importance of writing 'kaleidoscopic histories'¹⁹⁷ in which totalising concepts are rarely helpful.

New Labour's third way politics ultimately rendered left values technical not *only* by implementing technocratic managerial reforms but also by incorporating practices, such as design, that could translate the political into the technical and vice versa. Third way thinkers engaged with the technical demands of democratic government in a world that neither lent itself towards the traditional organisation of liberal democracies nor towards

more radical models of democratic politics. Patchy, incomplete, and always provisional though these historical assemblages might be, they alert us to a set of interesting problems of liberal modernity which perhaps today are more relevant than ever.

First, irrespective of their leanings towards democratic idealism or realism, third way thinkers were fully aware that political collectivities are always (at least potentially) in need of being constituted.¹⁹⁸ This awareness of the inherently problematic nature of collective political actors made them realise that assembling publics is not only deeply political but must also always be a technical act. The demand for participation, after all, does not guarantee success. What if people refuse to or cannot participate? What if the participatory setting highlights political division rather than commonalities? Participation cannot only fail; it also incurs costs in terms of taxpayer money and time invested in deliberation. Far from discouraging participatory formats, third way thinkers engaged these issues by developing *technical frameworks* that decreased the risk of negative spillover effects.

Second, political contestation is not *automatically* an appropriate element of democratic systems which have to guarantee the stability of society. Perhaps, reflexive modernisation lost out compared to the more easily translatable frame of communitarianism and associationalism. Yet, as Andrew Barry noted more than two decades ago, '[p]olitics, after all, is both about contestation, and the containment of contestation'.¹⁹⁹ Imposing a temporal and linguistic structure, design methods limit participation to a select few forms of interaction, narrowly focused on concrete problems or 'missions'. This attention to 'orchestrating' participatory forums makes clear that contestation in public design is not about airing grievances but about collective problem-identification and resolution. Although it renders what would otherwise be recognisable as democratic processes more instrumental, it does not necessarily imply that public design is technocratic or depoliticising. Rather, the New Times notion of the problematiser, whose role it was to 'decipher the new rules of the social game even as they are coming into existence',²⁰⁰ required technical as well as political tools.

Third, opening the doors to citizens and their various associations is not an easy change to make for governments which have to continue to provide public services, regulate the economy, and negotiate with other nations. Making adjustments to working institutions, even if their operation could use improvement, is like 'rebuilding the ship at sea'.²⁰¹ As third way thinkers were entering the machinery of government, the free-wheeling and idealist thinking no longer served to guide actual reforms. Whereas the 'Old Left' had perhaps rendered itself too technical, this 'New Left' remained cognisant of the recursive co-constitution of the political and the technical.

If public design is indexical of how liberal democracies have been rewired at the end of the millennium—and continue to be reworked today—then thinking about the political mutations introduced by third way political thought and their practical translation can help to explain a great deal about the recent modalities of problematisation. Though this process remains murky, public design may be as good a place to start as any if we want to shed light onto these shifts. More than three decades ago, taking 'the problem of order' out of the hands of elected and unelected political leaders and placing it 'in the hands of individuals and their societal *associations*'²⁰² was an attractive proposition which resonating with third way political thought. Contrary to recent arguments that the vibrancy of the New Times debate '[gave] way to more reductive political solutions in the 1990s and

beyond',²⁰³ I tried to show a picture that is more complicated. This story might even help to refract our own political present. As Ulrich Beck remarked long ago, reflexive modernisation means that society and government have 'become politically designable [*gestaltbar*]'.²⁰⁴ Perhaps, then, such polyphonic histories, can show us an understanding of 'politics in the autonomous, form-giving [*gestaltenden*] sense of the word'.²⁰⁵ Being reminded of this meaning, I would argue, is direly needed today.

Notes

1. Thatcher, "Foreword."
2. Bason, "The Diversity."
3. OPSI, <https://oecd-opsi.org/about/>. Accessed July 2024.
4. Clarke and Craft, "The Twin Faces of Public Sector Design."
5. Collier and Gruendel, "Design in Government."
6. Junginger, *Transforming Public Services by Design*.
7. "World Design Capital Frankfurt RheinMain 2026."
8. Geiringer and McCarthy, "Beyond the End of History"; and Hilton, Moores, and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "New Times Revisited."
9. Murphy, "'Towards a Modern Democracy?'".
10. Daddow, "New Labour: A Witness History."
11. O'Hara, "New Labour in Power," 228.
12. Mark Bevir noted that figures such as Geoff Mulgan or Charles Leadbeater have largely gone unnoticed in typical accounts of New Labour, Bevir, *New Labour*, 30–31.
13. Geiringer and McCarthy, "Beyond the End of History."
14. Dunt and Lynskey, *Centrism*.
15. Giddens, *The Third Way*.
16. Rose, "Community, Citizenship," 1395.
17. Cross, "A History of Design Methodology."
18. Bason and Austin, "Design in the Public Sector."
19. Kimbell et al., "Design & Policy," 18.
20. Whicher. "Evolution of Policy Labs," 255.
21. Kimbell et al., "Design & Policy," 7.
22. Leurs, González-Ortega, and Hidalgo, "Experimenta"; Rebolledo-Bustamante, "Design in Public Innovation."
23. Moor, "Designing the State."
24. Julier, *Economies of Design*.
25. Bailey, "Governmentality and Power."
26. Williams, "The Co-Constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism."
27. Adams Stein and Moore, "Neoliberalizing Design and the State."
28. Mathieu, "From Thatcher to Johnson"; and Dalingwater, "Civil Service Reform and the Legacy of Thatcherism."
29. Jessop, "New Labour or The Normalization of Neo-Liberalism?"; Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*; and Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented*.
30. Gilbert, "An Aesthetics of Solidarity," 23.
31. Vernon, "Heathrow and the Making of Neoliberal Britain."
32. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Davies, and Jackson, "Introduction: A Neoliberal Age?" 1.
33. *Ibid.*, 11.
34. *Ibid.*, 15.
35. Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has argued convincingly that in the 1980s, the notion of class rapidly declined as a term around which the public mobilised. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "Discourses of 'Class' in Britain in 'New Times'."
36. Collier, "Neoliberalism and Rule by Experts," 26.

37. Etherington, *Austerity, Welfare and Work*.
38. Burnham, "Politics of Depoliticisation," 128–29.
39. Barton, "New Labour's Management, Audit and 'What Works' Approach to Controlling the 'Untrustworthy' Professions."
40. Bevir, *Third Way*, 135.
41. See e.g. Daddow, "New Labour."
42. Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*, 18.
43. Steer, "Keep the Party Labour," 216.
44. Bevir, *New Labour*, 61.
45. Rose, "Birds on the Wire," 314.
46. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Davies, and Jackson, "Introduction," 12.
47. Murphy, "The Forgotten Rival of Marxism Today."
48. Hall and Jacques, *New Times*.
49. Leadbeater, "Power to the Person," 17.
50. Recent scholarship shows that individualism did not originate exclusively on the political right. It grew also out of 1960s counterculture, shaping conservative policy even as it energised anti-Thatcher resistance. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference*; Robinson et al., "Telling Stories about Post-War Britain"; and Hilton, Moores, and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "New Times Revisited".
51. Campsie, "Socialism Will Never Be the Same Again," 166, 170.
52. Hall and Jacques, "Introduction," 13.
53. Ibid., 11.
54. Alfie Steer recently argued convincingly that the coinage of the term 'Old Left' was part of a broader communicative strategy which later shaped New Labour as a platform. Steer, "Keep the Party Labour," 225–7.
55. Mulgan, "Uncertainty," 383.
56. Hall and Jacques, "Introduction," 14.
57. Leadbeater, "Back to the Future," 13.
58. Ibid., 13–14.
59. Leadbeater, "Power to the Person," 15.
60. Leadbeater, "Back to the Future," 13.
61. Andersson, "The People's Library and the Electronic Workshop."
62. Mulgan, "Uncertainty," 384.
63. Ibid., 379.
64. Leadbeater, "After ERM," 19.
65. Mulgan, "Power to the Public," 15.
66. Ibid., 17.
67. Hall and Jacques, "Introduction," 16.
68. Mulgan, "Uncertainty," 384.
69. Miliband, "Introduction," 15.
70. King, *Britain at the Polls*, 1992.
71. Pautz, "Think Tanks in the United Kingdom and Germany."
72. Demos, "Sending Brainwaves over the Heads of the Grey Suits."
73. Pautz, *Think-Tanks, Social Democracy and Social Policy*.
74. Kooiman and van Vliet, "Riding Tandem," 146.
75. Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 4.
76. King, "Overload," 295.
77. Kooiman and van Vliet, "Riding Tandem," 146.
78. These theories existed on the left as well as the right. Birch, "Overload, Ungovernability and Delegitimation"; For an account of Claus Offe's idea of irrationalisation, see Collier, "Insurance and the 'Irrationalization' of Disaster Policy."
79. Mulgan, "Seven Maxims," 31.
80. Wicked problems have long served as a critique and practical programme for reconstruction. Gruendel, "The Technopolitics of Wicked Problems."

81. Gruendel, "Policy Design or Design for Policy."
82. Clarke and Stewart, "Wicked Issues," 2, emphasis added.
83. 6, *Holistic Government*.
84. Clarke and Stuart, "Wicked Issues," 3.
85. Geyer, "Beyond the Third Way"; and Chandler, *Resilience*.
86. Miliband, "Introduction," 14.
87. Adonis and Mulgan, "Back to Greece," 233.
88. Mulgan and Landry, *Invisible Hand*, 64–66.
89. *Ibid.*, 106.
90. Mulgan, "Power of the Weak," 30.
91. Anthony Giddens remarked that 'liberal democracy, based upon an electoral party system, operating at the level of the nation-state' was now running up 'against the limits of modernity.' This raised the question of what precisely 'we should understand by democracy.' Giddens, "Brave New World," 27–28.
92. 6, "Governing by Cultures, 7; and Mulgan, "The Buck," 24.
93. Giddens coined "Third Way" in *The Third Way* (1998) and *The Third Way and Its Critics* (2000), works that strongly shaped New Labour's approach to social democracy. His version of Third Way ideology also permeated later policy papers and statements by Third Way governments. He became a prime target for scholars and activists who saw Third Way politics as abandoning Old Left principles in favour of ideas inherited from Thatcherism. See Bevir, "New Labour"; Townshend, "Living with Capitalism".
94. Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*, 22.
95. Mulgan, personal communication, June 28, 2025.
96. Collier, "Neoliberalism and Rule by Experts," 29.
97. Giddens noted that exchanges took place through 'a series of informal evening discussion,' *Third Way*, ix.
98. Beck, *Feindlose Demokratie*, 105, translation by author.
99. *Ibid.*, 120.
100. Beck, Bonss, and Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization," 1.
101. Mulgan, personal communication.
102. Beck, "Reinvention," 29.
103. *Ibid.*, 23, emphasis in original.
104. *Ibid.*, 18, emphasis in original.
105. *Ibid.*, 36.
106. Baumann, *Alone Again*, 36.
107. Mulgan, *Apolitical Age*, 19.
108. Giddens, "Post-Traditional Society," 106.
109. Giddens, *Third Way*, 71.
110. Beck, "Reinvention," 30.
111. Leadbeater and Mulgan, "Lean Democracy," 256.
112. *Ibid.*
113. Clarke and Stewart, "Wicked Issues," 14.
114. Select Committee on Public Administration, "Innovation in Citizen Participation in Government".
115. See note 113 above.
116. Bevir, *New Labour*; Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.
117. Demos published selected Etzioni texts on the topic of education, a core concern for Demos researchers, rather than expounding core tenets of communitarian philosophy.
118. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 168.
119. Bevir, *New Labour*, 140.
120. Bauman, *Alone Again*, 36.
121. Mulgan, "Beyond the Lure of Off-the-Shelf Ethics"
122. Mulgan and Landry, *The Other Invisible Hand*, 8.

123. See note 121 above.
124. Mulgan, "Seven Maxims," 31.
125. See note 121 above.
126. Bauman, *Alone Again*, 37.
127. On the decline of class as a frame for political collectivity, see Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference*.
128. See note 121 above.
129. Giddens, *Third Way*, 69.
130. Mulgan and Landry, *The Other Invisible Hand*, 52.
131. *Ibid.*, 71.
132. *Ibid.*, 115.
133. Bader and Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, 7.
134. Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, 6.
135. See note 133 above.
136. Hirst was involved in the New Times debate but was not entirely convinced. His contribution to the New Times book was a critique of the popular idea of post-fordism. Hirst, "After Henry".
137. Leadbeater, "Power to the Person," 19.
138. Mulgan and Landry, *Invisible Hand*, 8.
139. *Ibid.*, 64.
140. *Ibid.*, 52.
141. *Ibid.*, 64–66.
142. Bevir, *New Labour*, 29.
143. Clarke and Stewart, "Wicked Issues," 7.
144. Mulgan, *Antipolitical Age*, 33.
145. Clarke and Stewart, "Wicked Issues," 2.
146. Social Exclusion Unit, "Preventing Social Exclusion," 5.
147. Mulgan, personal communication, April 16, 2025.
148. Social Exclusion Unit, "Preventing Social Exclusion," 57.
149. *Ibid.*, 6.
150. See e.g. Rose, "Inheritance Before Choice in Public Policy".
151. Social Exclusion Unit, "Preventing Social Exclusion," 6.
152. *Ibid.*, 57.
153. Leonard, *Britain TM*.
154. Atkinson, *Common Sense of Community*.
155. Gruendel, "Symmetries of Ignorance".
156. Grønbaek et al., "Achieving Cooperative," 92.
157. *Ibid.*, 79.
158. Blomberg et al., "Ethnographic Field Methods," 142, emphasis added.
159. Bødker et al., "Cooperative Design," 164.
160. *Ibid.*, 158–59.
161. Leadbeater, *Personalisation*, 32.
162. Cottam and Leadbeater, "RED Paper 01," 22.
163. *Ibid.*, 29.
164. *Ibid.*, 22.
165. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
166. Stilgoe et al. *Received Wisdom*, 54.
167. *Ibid.*, 51.
168. *Ibid.*, 70–71.
169. Parker and Heapy, *The Journey*, 21.
170. Grove et al., "Designing Distance."
171. See here Collier and Gruendel, "Design in Government," 7.
172. Not everyone welcomed this view of design. Designer Thomas Heatherwick argued that 'no amount of re-designing is going to make [the state] less sinister,' and that one cannot 're-

design a bureaucratic process as an empowering moment.' Trying to do so, he said, was not only hubristic but patronising to the very idea of citizenship. Rogers and Cottam, *Touching the State*, 53.

173. Leadbeater, *Personalisation*, 29.
174. *Ibid.*, 57.
175. *Ibid.*, 85.
176. Kelly et al., "Creating Public Value," 31.
177. *Ibid.*, 3–4, emphasis in original.
178. *Ibid.*, 29.
179. Social Exclusion Unit, "Preventing Social Exclusion," 6.
180. Lucy Kimbell, personal communication, March 22, 2024; Charles Landry, personal communication, June 26, 2024.
181. "About RED."
182. Consultancies like IDEO used 'design thinking' to reshape strategic planning across sectors, turning a business tool for creating shareholder value into a method for generating public value. See Coughlan and Prokopoff, "Managing Change, by Design".
183. In 2004, Red organised a workshop on wicked problems, a term which had long been central to design.
184. Burns et al., "Red Paper 02," 9.
185. Sophia Parker, personal communication, November 27, 2023.
186. SILK Team. "Engaging Fathers Developing Support Services with and for Fathers"; and SILK Team, "SILK Dementia Programme 2011–2015."
187. Leadbeater, *The man in the caravan*, 174, 138.
188. Parker, personal communication.
189. Under Mulgan's leadership, the Young Foundation championed social innovation, especially design. In 2011 he became CEO of Nesta, created in 1998 by Blair's government. Both organisations were central to legitimising public design in the UK and abroad, a reach extended by spinoffs like States of Change, a government-innovation think tank whose global influence on public design is significant.
190. The Design Council, "UK Cabinet Office Launches New Policy Design Lab."
191. "Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Public Administration Committee".
192. British design scholars have noted the similarities of design to the American pragmatist thought of John Dewey. Dixon et al., "Introduction." Indeed, Dewey also influenced the democratic strain of neoliberal thought. Collier, "Neoliberalism and Rule by Experts".
193. Leadbeater, *Personalisation*, 73.
194. Pemberton, "What Matters Is What Works."
195. Pautz, "Think Tanks," 283.
196. Norris, "The Conservative Party."
197. O'Hara, "New Labour in Power," 228.
198. Marres, *Material Participation*.
199. Barry, "Anti-political economy," 270.
200. Beck et al. "Theory of Reflexive," 3.
201. Elster, Offe, and Preuss, *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies*.
202. Offe, "Selbstbeschränkung," 226, emphasis in original, translation by author.
203. Campsie, "'Socialism Will Never Be the Same Again'."
204. Beck, *Gegengifte*, 151.
205. Beck, *Die feindlose Demokratie*, 106.

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