**Key Thinker - Socialism**

**Anthony Giddens (1938–)**

Anthony Giddens is known mainly as a sociologist. Yet his work on political theory helped create a new strain of thinking within revisionist socialism: the Third Way.

•  In *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), Giddens first established his credentials as a socialist sympathiser, highlighting the ‘corrosive’ effects of capitalism and individualism upon community and fraternity. Yet he also stressed that capitalism and individualism were irreversible and that any future project towards greater equality would have to take account of this.

•  Giddens developed this theme in his next book, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, written at the t

ime of the 1997 general election and published during the first year of Britain’s New Labour government. He argued that the survival of social democracy required recognition that free-market capitalism had an unmatched capacity to empower individuals economically. However, he also argued that capitalism functioned best when there was a strong sense of social cohesion, which neo-liberalism seemed to overlook. So a triangulation — reconciling neo-liberalism’s view of economics with social democracy’s view of society — was required to make centre-left politics relevant in the twenty-first century.

•  Giddens claimed this triangulation was especially important given the emergence of ‘post-Fordist’ capitalist societies. During the mid-twentieth century, Fordist capitalism, based on huge industrial units of mass production, had spawned tightly knit urban communities, based on a uniformity of income and employment. These communities, Giddens explained, complemented human nature’s yearning for solidarity and fellowship by giving their members a strong sense of support and identity, which might then encourage them to challenge both economic and cultural elites (traditional trade unionism being one expression of this). Yet, according to Giddens, the post-Fordist capitalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries — involving the decline of heavy industry — had fragmented such communities, ‘atomised’ the modern workforce and left individuals feeling alienated.

•  Giddens accepted that, in many respects, this post-Fordist (or neo-liberal) capitalism was liberating for individuals — they were now freer than ever to ‘self-actualise’ and carve out individual identities. Yet those individuals would also find it harder to develop, precisely because society was becoming increasingly amorphous and ill defined. Stripped of the communities that once gave them confidence, human beings were likely to be less sure-footed and more likely to be influenced by both economic and cultural elites. So, for Giddens, the great irony was that the ‘individualisation’ of society might actually result in less individualism. Giddens therefore argued that if human nature were to flourish in the twenty-first century, the state — while retreating from economic management — would have to be more proactive, investing heavily in infrastructure (for example, better public transport and community services) and a modernised system of education, designed to prepare citizens for the knowledge economy (one where physical capacity was less important).

•  Giddens thus proved a key revisionist socialist in that he revitalised the case for further state action in an era of globalised capitalism. In doing so, he recognised that conventional Keynesian economics (which formed the basis of Crosland-style social democracy) was obsolete and that socialism needed to reconcile itself to a more free-market brand of capitalism. In the process, however, he was accepting that greater equality of opportunity might have to be accompanied by greater inequality of outcome if the free market were to generate the sort of wealth needed to fund modern public services. His arguments had a profound influence upon the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and the German social democratic government led by Gerhard Schröder.

