
Editorial

In 2014, we edited a collection of essays under the title *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester University Press). Our objective was really twofold. First, to generate discussion on the British left in general; to bring together scholars and writers in order to present a ‘way in’ to current thinking on the history of the British left. The context of the book’s gestation was telling: the idea began in the wake of the 2010 general election and the fall of New Labour. The global economic crisis of 2008 was still fresh and its interpretation ‘up for grabs’. Yet the left, especially the Marxist left armed with a still pertinent critique of capital, had not seemingly seized the initiative or much shaped the debate. The notion that it was ‘Labour’s fault’ – even that ‘old’ Labour spending habits lay behind the ‘crisis’ and thereby derailed New Labour and the economy more widely – held sway and was oft-repeated. The ‘moment’ of the 2015 general election was Ed Miliband’s being laughed at when he said he did not believe the previous Labour administration had spent ‘too much’.

Now, it is not intended here to revisit those debates. Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader, and recent events elsewhere in Europe, especially Greece and Spain, suggests there remain arguments to be fought for and won. The point of the book was to contribute to and broaden our understanding of the British left: to note its trajectories; its internal and external tensions; to consider on its campaigns, causes and approaches over the previous half-century (and counting). We wanted to draw reflection on how the left was positioned in the wake of such severe (and on-going) global economic developments.

Secondly, the book intended to initiate a constructive and friendly (perhaps comradesly) discussion *across* the left. To not simply trace the histories of a party, campaign or individual, but to bring together such accounts in order to compare, contrast and consider. To this end, the book took in an array of leftist groupings and covered various themes, featuring chapters examining the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, anti-racism and women’s liberation, anarchism and gay politics. The idea was to consider the left across its varied

contours, to critically reflect on and also to recover the struggles that have defined leftist politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

So far, the book has been received in the spirit in which it was intended. Fruitful discussions have been held at the Institute of Historical Research and Queen Mary's University; reviews have in the main been positive and constructive. Indeed, the fact – admitted by both of us in the volume's introduction – that such a project could only be partial and but a starting point to a more integrated leftist history, has been accepted and recognised. To this end, moreover, Manchester University Press will publish a second volume of essays in 2017, and special issues of *Contemporary British History* (on Ireland and the left) and, this edition of *Socialist History* (on left intellectuals) have been prepared. Plans are even afoot for a complementary volume examining the left in Australia from 1956, a project that should generate even wider contemplation of the left's histories across borders and continents.

But to the matter at hand – this issue of *Socialist History* came from the fact that submissions to a second volume, *Waiting for the Revolution*, contained a number of excellent and eminently publishable proposals examining aspects of leftist intellectual history. Rather than pick one proposal at the expense of the others for inclusion, therefore, we instead resolved to put together a 'special issue' that allowed for five relevant pieces to be produced in accord with each other. Here then are five articles, all distinct, but all examining aspects of British left intellectual history through and from the key date of 1956. The first, by Michal Schatz, looks at intellectuals in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) just prior to the upheaval that followed the Soviet intervention in Hungary and the infamous Khrushchev speech. Rather than being trapped in what Ian Birchall once described as 'a ghetto of intellectual sterility', Schatz suggests the party intellectuals warrant more generous attention, even if this was often in spite of – rather than because of – the party leadership/structure/politics of the time.

The second article is by Philip Bounds and concentrates on the literary criticism of Arnold Kettle. The article demonstrates how Kettle's approach revealed both the best and the worst of communist critique, combining both insight and sectarian illiberalism. Baris Tufekci, meanwhile, offers a sustained critique of Ralph Miliband's influential *Parliamentary Socialism*, first published in 1961 but reissued in 1972 following the Wilson governments of the 1960s. For Tufekci, Miliband must be seen as an 'internal critic of Labour who could not separate himself from the party, either politically or analytically'. His primary focus on Labour's ideological

shortcomings, Tufekci argues, meant Miliband kept open the possibility of Labour's transformation into a 'real' socialist party and thereby harnessed – uneasily – a contradiction: 'if what prevented Labour's socialist transformation was its dominance by non-socialist ideas, Labour was not so "irrevocably rooted" in the capitalist system as Miliband described it as being'.

A rather different focus comes from Christian Høgsbjerg, who traces and assesses C.L.R James' relationship with members and organisations across the British New Left. By so doing, Høgsbjerg takes us across various currents, interweaving James' ideas and concerns as the contours of the British left changed over the 1960s into the 1970s. Finally, Ian Gwinn looks at the role played by Raphael Samuel in the process of formulating and implementing a democratic vision of the History Workshop. Focusing not just on the journal, but also the events organised by HW, Gwinn proposes that Samuel was responsible for fashioning a new politics of history that extended and recast the conceptions of earlier British Marxists.

What we hope comes across in these articles is the flow of ideas on the British left, between the far left organisations of the Communist Party, the International Socialists and the International Marxist Group, the journals of the New Left, such as *The New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review*, and the Labour Party itself. These articles demonstrate that the transmission of ideas did not necessarily flow merely from the Labour Party outwards, but debates within far left and New Left circles impacted upon the centre. As always, more could be said and more work needs to be done. However, we hope this issue of *Socialist History* stands alone as a portal into some of the best current work on British socialist intellectuals and as a complement to broader research into the politics, actions and ideas of the British left.

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