

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (eds)**, *Against the Grain: The British Far Left From 1956*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-7190-9590-0 (cloth)

This collection of essays on the British far Left starts in 1956, a “year zero” (p.3) in which thousands left the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in reaction to Khrushchev’s “secret speech” and the Russian invasion of Hungary. Although the editors offer a broader definition of the far Left, the book is largely concerned with Leninist-influenced organisations. Social movements, such as gay and women’s liberation, are included, but the focus is primarily on how Leninist groups related to them. After an introductory overview chapter, the book is divided into two sections. “Movements” includes chapters on Trotskyism, the New Left, anarchism, and oppositional groups in the CPGB. “Issues” focuses on the interaction between these far Left groups and the women’s liberation movement, gay politics, “third worldism”, and anti-racism. Defining the far Left as “all of the political currents to the left of the Labour Party” (p.3) is understandable but a little too neat. Not only because certain far Left groups—most obviously Militant—operated within the Labour Party, but also, as various chapters in the book hint, the British Left was far more fluid than this suggests. The Labour Party Young Socialists, for instance, were important in the development of Trotskyist groupings (p.83) and many individuals passed between the Labour Party and Leninist organisations. Moreover, certain individuals and elements in the Labour Party—the “municipal socialists” of the 1980s for instance—could be considered to the left of sections of the CPGB.

This fluidity of the Left is clearest in the most successful contributions here: both those that focus on individual life stories, and those that attempt to relate the Leninist groups to broader social movements. An example of the former, Celia Hughes’ interviews with individuals who became active in the Left in the 1960s develops a number of interesting themes: the importance of left-wing family backgrounds, the role of subcultures in emerging activist groups (which is also in evidence in Rich Cross’ chapter on anarchism in the 1980s), and the formative role of immigrant experiences. The last of these chimes with Satnam Virdee’s recent suggestion, not pursued in his contribution here, that “colour coded” approaches to race in Britain miss the importance of “white” socialists

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from immigrant backgrounds (especially Jewish and Irish) in fostering anti-racist politics (see Virdee 2014: 124). Hughes' work focuses on the subjective, but not in a narrow way, arguing for the importance of "the relationship between 'the self and the social' as well as the emotional and the political" (p.63). Together with Sue Bruley's investigation of the relationship between socialist women and the women's liberation movement, these chapters suggest that oral histories are potentially much richer sources than internal documents of far Left groups, not least because they remind you that activists are real people—who are shaped by and struggling with the social conditions in which they find themselves as much as anyone. My only reservation results perhaps from a lack of space, but it does seem worth being more critical about the life stories told by activists. That a Marxist will suggest the centrality of childhood experiences of class in shaping their politics is almost tautological. It may also be useful to see some greater critical reflection on "class" more broadly. Bruley's eight interviewees, for example, are defined as largely working class on the basis of their parents' occupations. That all but one of these women had professional careers themselves is considered an aside. Perhaps this suggests the importance in leftist groups of what Raphael Samuel described—in relation to 1960s radical folk clubs—as "the sociologically orphaned—the ex-working class" (2012:306).

Class is most problematically summoned by Mark Hayes in defence of Red Action, a group probably best known for its confrontational approach to anti-fascism. While some of the critique of other sections of the Left outlined by Hayes has merit, the attempt to counterpose class politics with "identity politics" is less helpful. The idea that the politics of race, gender, and sexuality are "totally destructive to class unity" (p.241)—as one leading member put it—suggests a desire to return to a time before feminist, LGBT liberation, and black activists had forced some recognition on the far Left of the limits of its politics. It also sits uneasily next to Red Action's active support for the Provisional IRA, hardly less of a divisive cause. Graham Willett outlines part of the process of broadening class politics, in this case to include lesbian and gay politics, in the 1970s. His chapter is more generous towards Leninist groups than other accounts have been. In particular, it highlights the true novelty of gay and lesbian politics in the early 1970s and suggests we should not be too

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surprised that the revolutionary Left were initially hostile. Accepting this depends in part on “whether one assumes that socialists can be expected to transcend the limitations of their own times” (p.175), but perhaps more important is how the structures of organisations allow, or do not, for new politics to emerge. The CPGB in this account emerges as structurally more receptive to “influence of new social forces” (p.178) than the smaller Trotskyist organisations.

Virdee makes perhaps the most compelling argument for the the importance of the British far Left. He argues that “the working class bifurcated on the question of racism in the late 1970s” (p.210) but a crucial role in aligning some sections of the working class with anti-racism was played by socialist activists and shop stewards. Virdee emphasises the significant trade union solidarity with the Grunwick strike led by Asian women between 1976 and 1978, and the formation of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, as key moments in this story. I find this argument convincing but there is certainly room for more detailed studies in understanding this process. These often white socialist activists, Virdee argues, were heavily influenced by the black power movement in the USA, anti-colonial national liberation movements, and the struggles of Asian and Caribbean workers against working-class and elite racism in the UK (p.215). This intersects with the concerns of Ian Birchall’s piece, which argues that “third worldism”—here understood as largely uncritical support for often repressive “socialist” regimes in the global South—while inspiring many individuals and helping renew the far Left, was a “political dead end” (p.205). Birchall offers a nuanced assessment but ultimately seems to concur with Tony Cliff that the frustration of British leftists led them to take “vicarious pleasure from people struggling elsewhere” (p.190). Virdee’s chapter suggests, however, that international solidarity, together with a range of other factors, fed directly back into the most successful political practice of the British Left in the 1970s. There is a productive tension here between the sense of class rooted in place particularly evident in Hughes’ chapter and a more expansive internationalist politics—between “militant particularism and global ambition” (Harvey 1995). This global politics should not be seen as an abstraction next to concrete local experiences. Birchall gives some examples of practical international solidarity—to which could be added others such as the International Brigades in 1930s Spain or the “London recruits” (Keable

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2012; Brown and Yaffe 2014) during the anti-apartheid struggle—mobilised through connections on the far Left. While keeping in mind the risks of “vicarious pleasure”, these attempts at creating international networks of solidarity are an important legacy worth recovering.

Some contributors to the book are not beyond reproducing some of the less constructive characteristics of sections of the British far Left. Paul Blackledge’s piece on the first New Left, accusing E.P. Thompson and most other leading figures of being simultaneously Stalinist and reformist, is particularly ungenerous. Those that left the CPGB partly in protest at the invasion of Hungary are alleged to have believed that Stalinist Eastern Europe showed the potential of a non-revolutionary route to socialism. The hero of the piece is Alasdair MacIntyre, and the reconstruction of his early Marxist thinking here and more thoroughly elsewhere (Blackledge and Davidson 2008) is worthwhile. Yet, his success is measured ultimately in the fact that his thinking led him to join the International Socialists, latterly the Socialist Workers Party (p.58). Thompson and the rest are mocked for their illusions in the Labour Party, of which Thompson once commented that being a member was “like being a member of the human race. You accept it without enthusiasm” (quoted in Palmer 1994: 84). With hindsight, the idea of winning the Labour Party as a whole to socialism may seem naïve but it is not clear that Trotskyist groups have been more successful. Even now, if I had to predict what was more likely, a socialist turn in the Labour Party or a revolution guided by a vanguardist party modelled on the Bolsheviks, I would hesitate. Overall, this book suggests that the British far Left is strongest when it engages with broader movements, and that a keen sense of its own limitations would not hurt.

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