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ANTIPODE

Daisy Payling, *Socialist Republic: Remaking the British Left in 1980s Sheffield*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781526150301 (cloth); ISBN: 9781526150295 (ebook)

Helen Jackson, *People's Republic of South Yorkshire: A Political Memoir 1970-1992*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2021. ISBN: 9780851248967 (paper)

The early 1980s were the years when Thatcherism began to put its stamp on British politics, creating a legacy that still shapes political life today. But they were also the years in which what was identified as a new urban left, in councils including the Greater London Council (GLC), Sheffield, Liverpool, Islington, and Lambeth, among others, sought to present an alternative, even if there was not always agreement about what that alternative might be. There was even a newspaper—*Labour Herald*—that sought to bring them together. The councils attracted the epithet of "loony left". Until recently their experience has largely been marginalised and forgotten, if only because the Labour Party has sought to position itself as a respectable alternative to a series of Conservative governments.

But that experience is still relevant today and is beginning to attract attention again, among both political activists and academics. The GLC has often attracted the most attention, in part because of its high national profile and in part because of the legacy of publications it helped to generate. The strategies and initiatives that emerged from the GLC deserve to be the focus of renewed attention. But it is also important to reflect on experiences from elsewhere, both to provide a contrast with the GLC and to give them the autonomous status they deserve.

In the first half of the 1980s South Yorkshire attracted the label of "People's Republic", initially because of the County Council's commitment to low fares before being associated with the local socialist ambitions of Sheffield City Council. These two books, one by a historian and the other by an active participant in the process, each engage with the moment in ways that bring it to life, raising and highlighting issues that remain vital today.

Daisy Payling develops a thoughtful critical analysis in bringing what she describes as Sheffield's complex, inchoate, rich, and diverse politics to life. She identifies a "flourishing radical and alternative milieu", giving due attention to the dominance of the local labour movement but going beyond it to highlight sometimes uneasy relationships with other new

left identities (particularly the women's movement, environmentalist campaigns, anti-racist organisations, and LGBT activism). While acknowledging the significance of the initiatives launched by the council and recognising the importance of the links between the Labour Party and Sheffield's trade unions (particularly as represented by the Trades Council) she argues that this made it difficult to incorporate the wider identity politics of the new urban left. In Sheffield they were always secondary to a politics more deeply rooted in a traditional working-class community. For good or ill, this represented a sharp contrast with the politics of the GLC.

The discussion of the complexity and ambiguities is particularly apparent in the relationship of the local socialists to feminism and the women's movement. Payling notes that some feminists who had moved to the city had done so "to work with working-class people" and the labour movement successfully incorporated views of socialist feminists, but more experience led politics remained outside that mainstream. She argues that for many this enabled a fight for gender equality working within the labour movement while for the rest it meant organising separately.

Payling contrasts the politics of representation (which she identifies with Sheffield's left politics) with the politics of identity, which she suggests was marginalised. So, for example, in the case of political initiatives around LGBT issues, there was, she says, an emphasis on the defence of individual rights rather than solidarity or the recognition of an autonomous political identity. In this context, it was exciting, for those of us aging soulboys for whom he is an iconic figure, to see a brief reference to Dave Godin as apparently speaking for the council in presenting a version of the human rights line, even if he was himself a gay activist and had his own tensions with the council leadership over the programme to be presented at the council owned Anvil cinema, where he had a key role.

The Socialist Republic which Payling describes is one that sought to develop genuinely radical initiatives and she succeeds in drawing out both the ways in which a diverse combination of politics was brought together, while also highlighting some of the tensions associated with the differing priorities of a range of locally based actors stretching beyond the local labour movement.

Helen Jackson (whom Payling also interviewed as a source) comes at the experience from a different angle—as one of those centrally involved in local Labour politics, and as

someone who went on to become a local MP. Her take on the period has echoes but also highlights differences, from the perspective of an activist. She is deeply rooted in the political community out of which the Sheffield's local socialism emerged. She tells stories of camping holidays and the closeness of local politicians, which Payling notes, too. But she also charts her own relationship with the women's movement and the ways in which it influenced her, as well as highlighting the ways in which she learned from and engaged with the wider radicalism of the city. In contrast with Payling, Jackson celebrates the relationship with the working class as key, while highlighting the need to build to develop a more explicit strategy. But she also acknowledges the weaknesses of the Sheffield experience in failing to adequately engage with the women's movement or take up issues of race, working with activist groups.

The council's economic policies, to which Payling makes little reference, are at the centre of Jackson's discussion, highlighting both the ways in which they sought to challenge existing arrangements and how they later provided the basis for forms of partnership with local business. She emphasises the importance of the appointment of radicals from outside the system to shake things up, and even points to the influence of *Beyond the Fragments* as a source of inspiration (as it was for the GLC). One of the tasks of the new officers was to encourage culture change within the council machinery and to find ways of bringing economic and social policy together.

But Jackson also charts a longer period across the decade, as Sheffield began to position itself differently. She suggests that the trigger for this was the defeat over rate-capping and the abolition of the metropolitan counties and the GLC in the mid-1980s. The campaign over rate-capping already suggested that Sheffield was beginning to distance itself from some of the other left authorities—they claimed to be against rate-capping "for the right reasons" (implicitly unlike others). After the defeat over rate-capping says Jackson, "the bold emphasis on people-led progress towards a fairer society, driven by the belief that what was good for social progress and equal opportunity would help the local economy thrive and vice versa, became more hesitant and muted". By the end of the decade the emphasis had shifted towards the building of partnerships with the private sector to deliver development.

Despite the differences in emphasis between them, both of these books provide a strong basis on which to go back to the past to explore debates that remain relevant today.

The case studies they explore highlight what is possible, even if questions are also raised about the limitations of what can be achieved. Payling indicates that David Blunkett (leader in Sheffield in the early 1980s and Home Secretary under Tony Blair) argued that there is a political continuity between the initiatives of the period and the Blair era. That is difficult to believe after reading these books, which point towards more imaginative possibilities, even if they were ultimately not realised. This was an exciting—and sometimes even inspirational—moment in which activists sought to open up new possibilities in the face of what was then called the "new right" and we have now become more familiar with as the neoliberal state.

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