

TAKING STOCK OF A CENTURY OF SOCIALISM

George Ross

Donald Sassoon's *One Hundred Years of Socialism'* reads like a classic in the sense of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Sassoon does not dispose of his central character in front of a train, but what happens to European socialism is something rather similar, he thinks. European socialism tragically miscalculated and misunderstood until its enemies did it in. On Sassoon's evidence the socialist movement is today moribund. There is still a body left – contemporary social democracy – and it still breathes. But this is a case of mistaken identity: the body is an imposter.

Sassoon's book is weighty in all ways, with 780 pages of text, 1000 with supporting materials. Its size is commensurate with the tasks it sets. Indeed it could have been even longer. Sassoon wants to review 100 years of socialist movements in fourteen different European settings – Northern European and Scandinavian social democrats (including Austria, but not Ireland) plus Latin movements, both socialist and communist. If this breadth does not give plenty for experts to critique, his relative disinterest in organizations and political institutions probably will. His signal virtue, however, is starting where a first class socialist scholar would start, with the political economy of socialism.

As far as this reviewer is aware, this is the first such interpretative effort since the end of the 'Golden Age' of European capitalism and the arrival of the new ice-age of neo-liberalism in our time. It is certainly the most thorough, up-to-date and by far the best comparative history of European socialism that we have. Beyond Sassoon's multiple and fascinating comparisons, he tells a single story. If he is correct, and his evidence indicates that he is, he is saying something very strong about the present situation of the Left. The best way for a reviewer to do justice to these accomplishments is by recounting this story, therefore. Underneath the story is a 'Leninist-Gramscist' perspective on socialist history which also deserves reflection.

Expansion

The first fifty years of Sassoon's century is covered in only a little over 100 pages, one seventh of the entire book. What really matters about this first period of 'expansion' is how it prepares us to understand more recent events. The late 19th century Marxist conceptual 'vulgate' which shaped most socialist reflection is Sassoon's point of departure. He simplifies it to three points – the capitalist state is unfair; history occurs in comprehensible stages; and the working class is a homogeneous group. The power of these three propositions was huge, he thinks: it shaped anti-capitalist Left radicalism into socialism. But each of these grand propositions was problematic. The capitalist state was certainly unfair, but too much emphasis on the state was likely to be a liability. That history occurred in clear stages led to the beliefs that history's movement could be understood in a positivistic way, that outcomes could be projected and that history was on socialism's side. This credo may have been psychically comforting, but could mislead socialists about who and where they were. Finally, the notion of the homogeneous working class was 'heuristicly' useful in bringing together disparate groups, but it masked differences along skill, **sectoral** and gender lines, and that some 'workers' were better than others at institutionalizing a definition of 'worker' biased towards their own interests.

Sassoon does a solid job portraying the socialist movement's inability to move from this holy trinity to practical ideas and strategies. The insurrectionary dream, in particular as defined and codified by the Bolsheviks, was no way out. Indeed Sassoon asserts strongly that the **Bolshevik**-inspired Communist movement had little or no strategy about confronting and transforming capitalism at **all**.² On the social democrat side Eduard Bernstein's 'revisionist' insight that capitalism was capable of **self**-regulation was partially correct, yet the insight made the movement's problems worse because it minimized the fact that capitalist self-regulation often happened in harsh crises, immense misery, illiberal politics and brutal war. Quite as significant, the insight pointed revisionists towards a bland parliamentarism in which socialists did politics exactly as done by non-socialists. Others tried to fill in the gaps in the inter-war period, but with little success. '**Planists**' advocated using the state and neo-corporatist managerialism in workers' interests. Gramsci contributed an important theory of the socialist movement's decline in the face of fascism – upon which Sassoon draws heavily – but provided few positive lessons to move in the opposite direction. Perhaps the most important new sources of reformist ideas came from outside the socialist movement altogether, from Keynes, for example.

Sassoon provides readers with both facts and analytical distance. The

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original vulgate lacked, but had promised, effective linkages between theory and practice. As flaws in the original trinity became clearer many flowers, and a number of weeds, grew, but adequate new answers were hard to find to link everyday struggle and movement towards socialism. This did not prevent the socialist movement from growing very large, however. Socialists thus 'practised' – with some erroneously confident of the theoretical correctness of their actions and others simply improvising. In general movements were involved in daily struggle for what their supporters seemed to want and this began to cumulate into vaguer large programmes. Thus the SPD clearly wanted a welfare state and a managed economy, for example, before being swamped by **Hitler**. Nordic social democrats moved more successfully in similar directions, laying the foundations for their post-war 'models' in the 1930s. Almost everyone knew that legal protection for trade unionism was essential.

Sassoon's central thesis might thus be qualified as 'Leninist-Gramscist.' What has been determining in the history of the socialist movement is an inability to establish linkages between theory and practice which would lead every day resistance beyond short-term demands towards socialism. As Lenin, among many others, understood, these linkages did not spontaneously emerge. It was up to socialists to perceive them theoretically and then forge them into practices which made sense to workers. By the Second World War there was a substantial socialist movement in existence across Europe with high aspirations but insufficiently clear ideas about how to turn them into reality. History refused to wait for the movement to articulate its thoughts, however. The War, along with the Great Depression and Fascism which preceded it, shattered the credibility of capitalism and created new openings for the mass Left. In many places the Left was in an even stronger position to promote its solutions because of its admirable role in national struggles against Nazism and Fascism. For the first time it would be called upon to respond to the demands of power.

Constructing Social Capitalism

Rather than moving to socialism, Socialists surged towards what Sassoon calls 'social capitalism.' To Sassoon the immediate post-war reformist period was a moment of policy improvisation by labour and socialist movements. For the first time presented with real power, socialists had to find things to accomplish. For the most part they pursued programmes that had no clear linkage with any socialist future, the tragic flaw of the movement, according to Sassoon. Instead, they found their policies either in the spontaneous desires of their bases or borrowed them from bourgeois reformists.

The expanded welfare state was perhaps the most noble of all Left

accomplishments. Workers needed protection against the predictable accidents of their own lives – healthcare, disability insurance, old age pensions – plus shelter from the harshness of the capitalist market – correctives for inequalities in cultural capital through education, poverty and unemployment. 'Social citizenship' was the answer. But the specific forms of these programmes were often borrowed from non-socialist sources. The British took over the proposals of Beveridge, the Swedes those of the Myrdals. On the continent there was an expansion of existing Bismarckian or Jacobin-Republican programmes. The results, although progressive, were often contradictory. Where universality and promoting equality were goals, programmes were often paternalistic in 'social engineering' ways, bureaucratic and vulnerable to underfunding and budget squeezing. Where the social insurance principle prevailed, the programmes were corporatistic and discriminatory in different ways. In almost all cases welfare states were gendered in favour of males. More generally, the relationships of such programmes with the class structure and the market were ill-conceived?

Increased state intervention in the coordination of national economic life and regulation of the market, often through public ownership, was another Left answer. What the Left insisted upon, for obvious reasons, was full employment. The theories of state intervention for full employment and other purposes were, however, once again either provided by reformist intellectuals like Keynes and Woytinsky or came from long-standing statist traditions (as in Jacobin France, where statism was rejuvenated by a new generation of technocrats). As with the welfare state, the articulation of different forms of state intervention with existing economies was more or less creative. In the UK 'planning' was invoked but never seriously implemented except as wartime controls. 'Public ownership' was a mantra without strategic content, a magical hope that change in legal ownership would shift economic logics. The nationalizations which occurred mainly responded to worker grievances against certain employers and tended to fall in exhausted *rustbelt* sectors. Elsewhere things were different, but hardly more promising for socialist transition. In France, for example, nationalizations were used for indicative planning which was both successful and acceptable to a weak capitalist class used to statist leadership. In Sweden, with a small, open economy dominated by a few large corporations which demanded flexibility on the international market, there was little public ownership at all. In Austria, public ownership was a legacy of Nazism rather than a product of the Left. In general, where there was public ownership, there were few socialist ideas about its connection to transcending capitalism.

The only exceptions to this absence of linkage between socialist theory and reforms were found, on occasion, in Communist parties, but they were hardly comforting. Communist parties, particularly in France and Italy,

saw reforms in terms of consolidating political alliances that would be useful in advancing Soviet interests. When they thought about the domestic political directions of these 'united fronts,' it was in terms of 'national roads' to socialism or, in the parlance of the immediate post-war period, to 'popular democracy.' The theory connecting to practice here was, alas, crude. Reforms would be manipulated to place Communists in beachheads in the state. When these beachheads were strong enough, the Communists would assert hegemony, then control, over the state. From there movement to emulate the Soviet model would be the objective. The 'national road' idea was not implausible for a brief post-war moment, but it was profoundly undemocratic. In any event, Western communists were never able to implement the idea, and not only because of the Cold War. In fact, it contradicted their higher priority: promoting Soviet diplomatic goals.

Welfare states, public sectors and state economic management were all profoundly national. The Left, where it had influence, used it to construct reformulated national 'mixed' political economies. The limits of the Left's profound 'nationalization' were nowhere more evident than in the realm of foreign affairs. As Sassoon points out, socialist ministers 'realistically' followed 'national interests' in their diplomatic pursuits as if they had read Henry Kissinger from cover to cover. There was no such thing as a 'socialist foreign policy,' in other words. The Labour Party provided the classic illustration of this with its pursuit of an Empire-based strategy at the very great costs of British absence from the processes of European integration, but other socialist administrations did analogous things. There was, however, one enormous constraint. The coming of the Cold War meant that social democrats could express their national interests only under an umbrella of anti-sovietism and pro-Nato Americanism. This caused considerable neutralist anguish among the social democratic rank and file, but there was little choice. The Americans were playing a very skilful game. Post-war reforms could not be consolidated on the basis of available national resources in Europe, since everyone was flat broke. With the Marshall Plan and other incentives, the US granted social democrats the cash to do the job of consolidating, but at the price of Cold War pro-Americanism.

Revelling in an Age of Cold

Sassoon's central historical claim is that the cobbled-together nature of post-war reformism, its improvisation, borrowing and catering to populism, set the socialist movement up to be outmanoeuvred by capitalism in the Golden Age. The quarter century beginning in 1950 was the most extraordinary period of growth in capitalism's history. One dimension of this was the 'catch up' replication in Europe of the American

Fordist-Consumerist model within the reformed frameworks that the Left had helped build in the immediate post-war years. The Left's inability to link theory and practice after the War left it vulnerable to the recovery and renewal of capitalism itself. The Left's reforms could be reconciled with the booming market of the Golden Age, together becoming the 'Keynesian welfare state.' Extraordinary growth allowed redistribution of part of profit and taxes to support an expanding welfare state and created space for the higher wages that unions were in a position to demand. Many workers could thus become 'affluent' and fuel the consumption boom which, in turn, pumped up profits. State intervention allowed demand management to promote fuller employment which also fuelled growth.

Socialist movements were also coopted theoretically by the Golden Age through an exquisitely simple logic. Because post-war reforms flourished, capitalism was growing rapidly and it now seemed eminently steerable by the state, social democrats concluded that capitalism and the needs of ordinary people were compatible – capitalism and full democracy were compatible. Basic social transformation was therefore no longer needed and the search for connections between theory and practice to lead toward the transcendence of capitalism could be abandoned.

'Revisionism' in its first post-1945 variant thus triumphed. One favourite revisionist was Anthony Crosland who, Sassoon notes, at least had the good grace to insist that further reform towards greater equality was desirable. Others settled for managing the system as it was. Amidst Bad Godesberg and Gaitskell there was thus considerable variation in revisionism. There was also a lot of conflict inside the Left about it. But the revisionists spoke an important language to social democratic politicians and leaders who could henceforth proceed by promising slightly more than the Right to get elected – and in the 1950s socialist parties were doing much less well at the ballot box than they had after 1945. The **opponents** of revisionism were vociferous and numerous. Alas, they rarely defined clearly enough what it meant politically to have socialist commitment in the 1950s. Sometimes, they still even based their positions on traditions, scriptures and the **imagery** of satanic **mills**.⁴ Revisionists could retort that their opponents were hopelessly 'old-fashioned.'

The moment was tragic. The revisionists were fundamentally wrong in their analyses of capitalism and its futures. Quite as significant, however, both sides of the debate, in different ways, were oblivious to the basic social changes brought by the Golden Age. Socialist democrats had long since given up efforts to develop counter-hegemony among wage-earners, leaving culture open to profiteers. Multiple battlefields were thus surrendered with little struggle to consumerism, the onslaught of media, and commercialized youth culture. Few socialists noticed the changes in the position of women and the rapid rise of female labour force participation.

No one of importance foresaw the coming of a threatening autonomous intellectual and new middle strata radicalism, even when they were de facto part of it. Revisionists and their opponents both overlooked the environmental costs of the new capitalism. Most had but limited clues about the deeper meanings of decolonization and non-Western development. Sassoon claims, a bit hyperbolically, '... not one novelty worth writing or thinking about had been envisioned or predicted by the European socialist movement.' (p. 197). Taken in by the Golden Age, socialist leaders committed to a new consensus politics around a transient stage of capitalism in the belief that it was permanent.

Navigating with Bad Maps – The 1960s

The 1960s displayed the destructive contradictions of capitalist paradise. There were numerous short circuits built into the 'virtuous circles' of Golden Age political economies. The most important was the system's vulnerability to wage drift and inflation. Relatively full employment and high levels of unionization gave workers unusual market power. If they did not use it 'well' (by accepting that the health of capitalism was more important than their own interests) wages would rise faster than productivity, and resulting inflation would produce currency and trade imbalances. Different countries developed different ways of handling this problem. The most successful were 'neo-corporatist,' where large, powerful union movements, employers' associations and governments (or equivalent institutions) agreed on non-inflationary wage levels and tradeoffs to persuade workers to accept them. Neo-corporatism was most likely to be found in small, internationally open economies like Sweden and Austria, where excess inflation meant immediate and serious international trade problems. But they also existed, in different forms, in certain larger societies like Germany.

Problems thus emerged first in other settings like France, Italy and the UK. In such places militant labour movements existed which were either unwilling or organizationally unable to play the neo-corporatist game fully. Rising labour market tensions, usually fuelled by employer refusals to bargain seriously, led to very large strike movements in the 1960s and 1970s – concentrated in intense periods in France and Italy, spread out in the UK. But even where neo- and other-corporatisms were effective there were rising tensions. Workers demanded more money, but also new reforms like industrial democracy and investment control which, implemented, might have unbalanced their systems. So much, then, for the full institutionalization and decline of class conflict which leaders of the socialist movement had pronounced to be at hand. Workers were pushing strongly against the edge of the 'neo-capitalist' envelope. Quite as

important, capitalists understood this and began to recalculate benefits against the costs of the Golden Age order.

Simultaneously, and more mysteriously for both revisionists and their socialist opponents, there were major new middle class rebellions, the student movements of the 1960s and their issue-oriented sequels. Here, despite declaratory Marxism from young activists, the motivations and underlying themes were very different from anything the socialist movement had known in the past. Individual liberation, rather than collective representation, was an essential theme. This new libertarianism connected with strong anti-bureaucratic and anti-statist outlooks, coupled with an anarchist insistence upon direct participation. The fact that these new social movements had to coexist in Europe with labour movements, themselves rebellious, confused the picture but, more important, sometimes led to gigantic social explosions, as in France and Italy. But the new movements occurred everywhere, bringing their new modes and themes to 'Left' politics.

The final ingredient in the crisis of the 1960s was an international situation strained to the limit by the very same factors that had earlier held 'neo-capitalism' together. The American war in Vietnam was a major event. It caused and fed the largest student rebellion of all in the US, which spread quickly to Europe where it was essential in stimulating Europe's own youth movements. The war, the political difficulties of the American government, and the profligate economic policy which followed from them, contributed massive new inflationary tensions to an increasingly global economy and further fed European problems. On top of this the Americans were no longer able, and willing, to administer an international capitalist monetary system without narrowly pursuing their own interests, another disaster in the making.

None of what occurred in the 1960s fit the various models of revisionism. The revisionist-led movement had assumed that all conceivable problems could be handled by clever management within the parameters of Golden Age capitalism. Most socialist leaders, and many communists as well, believed that working class conflictuality could be 'contained' (the operative word) by fine-tuning macroeconomic management and coaxing unions into deals to moderate wages in exchange for incremental labour market reforms. New middle strata and new social movements were also understood in managerial ways. Everything could go on as before if the movement could adjust its electoral appeals to buy support from these new libertarians. Finally, disruptions in the international system were seen as but temporary, manageable by conciliating the Americans, adjusting currency values and negotiating new trade agreements. There was an important additional dimension. The revised socialist movement, which had lived so long within specific national cocoons,

blindly believed that nothing could possibly occur to attenuate the integrity of national political economies. All in all, as Sassoon shows, the official Left, socialist and communist (witness the Italian Communists' disastrous pursuit of 'historic compromise' in the 1970s), was wrong about the situation every step of the way.

Done in by the Stages of Capitalism?

Far from being able to connect theory and practice most of the socialist movement was eager, by the end of the 1970s, to manage capitalism, just at that point where Golden Age capitalism was about to rejoin other golden ages as fond memory and fantasy. What resulted was genuine 'crisis.' And, to cite Sassoon, '... when this model of capitalism entered into crisis, so did the concomitant model of social-democratic politics...' around which the official left had convened. The result was that '... by the early 1990s, the Left had been comprehensively defeated in the West, while in the East the smouldering ruins of the communist experiment marked the apparent global triumph of the system of private capitalist accumulation.' (p. 446) The socialist movement, out of practical ideas, let alone socialist ideas, was approaching the end of its century.

Why did the Golden Age end? Growth levels and productivity levels dropped steeply and unemployment rose. Experts conflict in explaining this, however. One group cites new market internationalization. Even if disagreements remain hot and heavy about how much, and what, 'globalization' has occurred, there has been financial transnationalization, a shift of semi-skilled Fordist employment away from Europe, an accentuation of the importance of transnational corporations, increased foreign direct investment throughout the advanced capitalist areas and, finally, increasing international trade. Another group asserts that the new wave of technological change destroys jobs more than it creates them. A third group points to political decisions by elites to move away from a full-employment macroeconomic policy towards price stability. Similarly, the renewal of European integration in the '1992' programme – involving fundamental political decisions in the making of which 'socialists' were central – was constructed around the premise of market deregulation. The decision for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) has made monetarist price stabilization and market liberalization practically inevitable into the third millennium.

Capitalist elites had decided that the era of regulated capitalism was over. The time had come to 'return to the market.' They also decided that the capitalist system could live quite well without strong unions, social protection programmes and efforts to limit inequality. The consequences for socialists were catastrophic. Unemployment weakened unions and made

it easy for governments and employers to dispense with trade union help in controlling wage drift and inflation. 'Trends towards corporatist intermediation' became 'trends towards market intermediation.' Everywhere deregulation and privatization came onto the table. Rolling back the welfare state was difficult because of its popular support, but the costs of rising unemployment, constraints on budgetary deficits and longer-term debt plus elite hopes placed it under strong indirect pressure. Above all, the seductive dream which brought socialists into the Golden Age consensus, that the national state could manage the flows of national economies to promote mild redistribution and social protection, completely foundered. The 'nationalization' of socialists, perhaps the most important 'heavy tendency' in their history, now played strongly against them. Even the 'third way' models like Sweden and 'Modell Deutschland' faltered under these pressures.

This provides the setting for the end of Sassoon's *One Hundred Years* when the body impersonating socialism enters. Different socialist movements confront this crisis in particular ways, and Sassoon is exhaustive in providing the details, but most have a standard package of ideas with no pretence of promoting socialism. In our times, theory consists of watching opinion polls while practice is to follow these polls wherever they lead. Social democrats – for now everyone who counts politically is a social democrat – thus present themselves slightly to the left of centre in political spectra which have shifted dramatically to the Right. But they promise little but austerity and sacrifice in the short run, allegedly in the service of 'enhanced national competitiveness in the global marketplace' that will later allow modest reforms, slight reflation, slightly less pressure on the welfare state, slightly less contemptuous practices towards the less fortunate and so on. 'Positioning,' rather than principle, is the new name of the game. Class discourses and workerist vocabulary have all but disappeared and as workers and workerism decline in salience, fighting over the new middle class (even, indeed, over the old middle classes) has become the road to salvation, which now means only victory in elections.

None of this has occurred without quite dramatic conflicts *inside* socialist parties. Here the British Labour Party, or perhaps the Italian Communists, are models. By and large, however, opponents of the new course have been marginalized, leaving the **Blairs**, **Jospins**, **d'Alema**s and others in charge. 'New Labour,' the 'rally of the middle classes,' is also typical in seeking its inspirations in President Bill Clinton. American Democrats, once regarded as exceptions because the US had no socialist tradition, are now regarded as the model to be emulated. In the meantime, workers, whose emancipation in socialism was the express goal of the socialist movement, desperately try to protect their threatened positions, sometimes voting for the conservative Right, sometimes for a new populist

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right which could well become a grave danger for democracy itself.

Century's End?

The century of socialism is over, Sassoon concludes. What is Left is no longer socialist. The body remaining is an imposter for which most of us vote when the time comes since there exists no viable alternative to limit the damage of neo-liberalism. Yet few of us are naive about what our votes will produce. They may, or may not, stave off the worst. Sassoon's conclusion is gloomy in the extreme, therefore. The story is worse than the old 'social democrats were never any good' line that most of us have used, usually in the belief that there were other, more promising ways of proceeding. What has happened, Sassoon claims, is that socialism's inability to link transformative theory to daily practice with a **transformative** logic has, over time, been fatal.

To recapitulate, the story begins with an expanding, although nationally and doctrinally divided, European socialist movement that was successful at imposing its presence. Sassoon's thesis contends that this movement's failure was at translating these abstractions into actions to link peoples' everyday struggles to the coming of a socialist future. Despite this failure socialism became the reigning opponent of capitalism after its first half century. Thus when Fascism, Depression and war discredited capitalist elites, if not capitalism itself, and post-World War II Western European societies adopted democratic institutional forms, socialists came to power. Without socialist policy answers they improvised reforms. These post-war reforms were then consolidated as part of the most successful period of capitalist expansion in history. Consolidation led socialist leaders, and many socialists themselves, to accept the capitalist self image of the period and believe that prosperity had become permanent. This, to Sassoon, was not a simple 'betrayal' but a tragic turn into an historic cul de sac. From being the confused reigning opponent of capitalism socialism thus became the loyal opposition within capitalism. For a very brief time this allowed some redistribution, enhanced social protection for many workers, rising living standards, not to speak of credibility for socialist politicians and considerable power for trade unions and socialist parties. Socialism installed itself *within* capitalism, trading away its self-ascribed vocation for transforming it, at huge costs.

The Golden Age was not the end of capitalist history. Instead it was an exceptional moment whose own internal contradictions foreshadowed its end. When it did end abruptly it gave way to a new period defined by, among other things, governmental elites and capitalists dismantling the processes, structures and reforms which socialists had believed to be permanent. Socialist movements, chasing Europe's political shift to the

Right, then abandoned everything except opportunism. If workers were no longer likely to be a 'universal class,' and if their desires for protection from market cruelties seemed to stand in the way of global competitiveness – whatever this meant – then so be it, these kind of workers were no longer needed. Indeed, the concept of class should be dropped altogether because vote hunting involved turning to middle classes who, as Marx shrewdly noted, refused to see themselves as parts of any class, even if their interests conflicted with those of workers and almost always with those of the poor. This meant abandoning all but marginal prospects for providing the kinds of policies that workers and the poor needed. In response workers began to instrumentalize Socialists in their votes and attitudes, just as Socialists had come to instrumentalize them. A 'crisis of politics' thus opened in which ordinary people lost hope and either became targets for nationalist and populist mobilizations or hunkered down in cynicism.

Has Sassoon therefore cast socialism, as Tolstoy cast Anna Karenina, in front of a moving train? His message is bleak. Things have gone well beyond ousting misleaders and correcting their mistakes. The post-war choices made by different movements have led to the liquidation of movement credibility and resources. Hope for socialist transformation and belief in the dimensions of what Sassoon labelled the 19th century 'vulgate' have become marginal phenomena. The decline of 'class' has already been mentioned. The belief that history can be understood rationally is in full retreat before the twin epistemological terrors of our time, neo-Smithian or neo-Benthamite methodological individualism and post-structuralism, with the latter having wrought particular havoc on the Left. That the capitalist state is unjust is widely recognized, but misunderstood now to mean 'captured by special interests' (which it is, but there is a deeper logic at work). Recognition of the state as a systematic source of injustice is a mixed blessing, however, since it has nourished ferocious anti-statism on both Left and Right. We perceive it most easily on the Right where it manifests itself in the credo that markets are the only way to decide and distribute. On the Left, in anarchist and communitarian forms, it is more subtle and perhaps more congenial, but still not very useful for working change.

This destruction of long-standing socialist beliefs has been accompanied by the decomposition of socialist organizations. Mass parties, originally meant as microcosms of new democracy and centres for a more humane counter-culture, have given way to elitist organizations for electoral engineering. After elections, political managers take over to pursue their trade statistics, input-output matrices and deal-making with big interest groups. Leaders are manufactured to be 'stars' in their own firmament. Trade unions still exist and are still held to their traditional mission of producing real returns for their supporters, but they, too, have

lost much strength since the Golden Age and often they represent memberships of older males, with women, young people and 'a-typical' workers left more or less to their own resorts.

Sassoon's exhaustive and detailed discussion obliges us to recognize the magnitude of the problems that the next 100 years of socialism face, beginning now. Can a plausible socialist movement be rebuilt? At least in European societies the relative decline and fragmentation of workers, the rise of alternative progressive vocabularies from new middle strata movements constructed around 'oppressed category' themes, the deepening of self-affirming individualism and the anti-statism that accompanies it, are all realities that must be confronted. And whatever the extent of globalization, decline in the economic and social policy capacities of most nation states is real.

The decomposition of large collective identities since the 1970s has been extraordinary, and certainly no accident. Capital and elites have discovered a mine of new ways to divide populations into conflicting and isolated groups. Can a new coalition of different salaried groups be put together over time that will have the cultural and political salience of the old 'working class'? This is vital, not only to socialism but to the future of democracy. The present dismantling of social and political citizenship promoted under the guise of marketization is premised on exploiting divisions between less and more secure groups and it is menacing indeed. Next, is there a socialist method to transcend the 'oppressed category' debate? However much this has been important to the Left in underlining the complexity of social life and the ways that traditional socialist discourse simplified it, it is now clear that this debate leads to a reformulated interest group politics that technocratic and capitalist elites can master through divide and rule tactics. Then how can rampant individualism be confronted? Socialists should not deny the positive side of large numbers of people recognizing that there can be a vast range of creative human biographies. Capitalists and their media prey on this, however, to provide contrived, controlling, profitable and very often demeaning contents for these noble aspirations. Finally, 'national' questions are fundamental. The nationalization of socialism in its first century was profound and its costs have been huge. How can socialism reconstitute its national capacities – something which implies a desperately serious effort to find the precise margins of manoeuvre for reform and change which remain – without creating new nationalist divisions? Underlying all of these matters are the eternal basic questions. What should equality and democracy be in our time?

It is to the credit of Donald Sassoon that we cannot avoid such questions. His work poses even deeper theoretical issues, however. Recall his organizing thesis. The socialist movement has been defeated by its own

inability to conceptualize its settings in an intelligent strategic way. The first century of socialism demonstrates consistent, and devastating, failures to construct linkages between theory and practice which would lead every day struggle towards socialism. The perspective posits that such linkages did not spontaneously emerge from ordinary working class life but had to be perceived and forged into struggle by Socialists. Historically, however, socialists were largely unable to counteract the material and cultural powers of capitalism over ordinary peoples' lives. Ultimately, most gave in to these powers.

This is a classic thesis, but Sassoon, like many socialists before him, presents it in a fundamentally ambiguous way, leaving it open to two different interpretations. The first is that there actually were such linkages between theory and practice waiting to be found. It would follow from this that the failure of the socialist movement occurred because it was unable to find them. The second is that there were no such linkages. This would mean that a socialist movement constructed in terms of searching for the linkage between theory and practice was bound to fail in any event. This basic ambiguity leads to further questions. If the first interpretation is correct, then we are entitled to ask what socialists should have done differently, in quite specific terms, and why they did not do so. Sassoon very carefully does not do either. If the second interpretation is more accurate, then Sassoon is really telling us that socialism was a collective dream rather than a realistically constructed transcendence of capitalism. If this is the case, why was the dream so widely believed and what have been its true historical functions? He does not answer these questions either. Herein lie the most important criticisms to be made of the book.

The first version of the 'Leninist-Gramscist' thesis has been central to serious socialist thought in one way or another throughout the past century. Positing that different realities can follow from different conceptual and strategic choices, and that humans are not simply constrained by what exists, helps us remove ourselves from the worst kind of positivism (which, moreover, has always been a fundamental servant of the capitalist status quo) and also gives us hope and some optimism, both qualities that progressives cannot live without. The problems with it are quite as obvious. While it is sound epistemologically to argue that the future is not entirely constrained by the logics of the present and that conceptual and strategic choices do make a great difference, there do not seem to be solid reasons to believe that any particular 'socialist' choices flow from this observation. In other words, individuals and collectivities have choices, but the logic of these choices cannot be connected to a state of affairs in the future, however desirable. This is a different question, of course, from whether it is or is not possible for a complex social movement to accumulate hegemonic momentum. But whether this momentum is targeted to achieve

'socialism,' or something else that its proponents want to label socialism, cannot be known.

The first version of Sassoon's thesis is unverifiable, therefore. The second version of it is more satisfactory philosophically, but much less uplifting politically, since it gives us no guarantees. Capitalism as a social order is oppressive and generates its own opposition, which it then has to channel and control. Sometimes it is very successful at this, sometimes less so. Sometimes it can co-opt and neutralize a large movement of opposition. This is Sassoon's argument about socialism in its first century. Sometimes it is effective at fragmenting opposition so that no large movement emerges at all. This seems to be what has been happening since the end of the Golden Age. Above all, Sassoon's story shows that the impatience of socialists about the rapid movement of history has been problematic. The first century of socialism might correctly be labelled 'One Hundred Years of Socialism in a World of Capitalist Nations.' The relative collapse of this particular world has opened a long, complex moment during which the socialist movement will be on the defensive. Socialists would do well to act accordingly. If they do so, and resolve some of the basic issues raised in Sassoon's deep, rich reflections, then their second century will be devoted to the construction of a genuinely international movement.

NOTES

1. Donald Sassoon *One Hundred Years of Socialism* (Hbk: London, I.B.Tauris, 1996; Pbk: Fontana, 1996), (New York, New Press, 1997).
2. At first the Bolsheviks were confident that capitalism was about to collapse into universal revolution around them. When this did not happen Bolshevism became 'socialism in one country', such that the strategy of Western Communism came to be built around the use of European communist movements to protect the Soviet Union. This degenerated quickly into the instrumentalization of European workers for Stalinist great power politics at huge costs in terms of dividing the socialist movement in Europe.
3. This is historically true despite much subsequent Left 'functionalist' reflection which insists upon seeing welfare states as neatly designed social safety valves for capitalism. One of Sassoon's many virtues is to reject these visions.
4. Some, like the French communists, even argued that workers were facing worsening impoverishment, just as the changes of consumerism and boom appeared.