PREFACE

It is becoming increasingly clear that we are at one of those historical moments that compel socialists to undertake a serious calibration of the political forces amassing on the right. This stems partly from the electoral breakthrough far-right parties have made in Europe as the global financial crisis and unrelenting austerity continue to take their toll. But not only in Europe. Across the globe the far right is on the move: the great strength of right-wing populism in the US Republican Party and Conservative Party in Canada; the increasing range of state surveillance and intolerance of dissent, features of what some have called ‘post democracy’; the success of the BJP in India and the return of right-wing militarism to the political scene in East Asia; the strength of Putin’s populist authoritarianism in Russia; the continued spread of religious fundamentalisms to almost all quarters of the Middle East and many countries in Africa, and the response to this in the form of a new military dictatorship in Egypt; and the ever-increasing strength of the Zionist and religious right in Israel.

It is particularly important in this context to take account of the particularities of the new right today in comparison with fascist political movements and states in the 1920s and 1930s, and also in contrast to various types of military and authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. The classical fascist movements embraced nationalist and protectionist economic policies; it is not at all clear that this is the case today where the radical right targets labour migration while tolerating the internationalization of capital. The same openness to the free movement of capital and the liberalization of domestic markets applies to authoritarian and military regimes today. It is too easy to draw a direct lineage from earlier European fascisms into timeless typologies, rather than attempt to uncover the discrete structural determinations of the radical right today.

The careful political mapping of the new right, undertaken by the 52nd volume of the Socialist Register, addresses pivotal questions in the reordering of the balance of political forces today. What is the far right’s social base? What is its organizational strength and range? To what extent does it
influence mainstream parties and opinion? How far has it penetrated state institutions? Even while the far right today is fluid and constantly mutating, as Liz Fekete has put it, the nature of its populist appeals and the foundations of their success require careful probing, amidst the rise in racialized violence and the ethnicist—let alone nationalist—hostility that has arisen in the face of the flows of human migration set loose by neoliberal capitalism. The very broad geographic as well as thematic range of the essays in this volume speaks to the global challenges the new right poses for the left.

There is a great strategic importance in a sober analysis of the strength of new right today, and the impasse of the left emerges here as a central concern. In confronting almost everywhere different permutations of right-wing populism gaining further ground in this phase of neoliberalism, and the creeping state authoritarianism taking form in new modes of surveillance and policing, we need to recognize the complicity of liberal and social democratic political agents in these developments. The limited political capacities of the radical left have also played a part, providing space for the rise of the right and the new authoritarianism in the current conjuncture.

As a good many of the essays here show, the severe contradictions in which the far right finds itself enmeshed often make its project quite fragile. We should therefore be wary of alarmism, while nevertheless carefully monitoring the radical right’s forms, practices and mobilizing capacities. If the far right were on the verge of closing the space that liberal democracy allows for freedom of association and free speech, then socialists would be obliged to engage in popular-front style cross-class alliances to defend that space. This would severely restrain radical socialist mobilization and programme until the threat was defeated.

Indeed, whether such space exists for this is being tested in Europe today by the maniacal enforcement (in which social democratic governments are as fully complicit as mainstream conservative ones) of austerity memorandums on the new Syriza government in Greece. This is, in turn, testing Syriza’s own capacity for animating the radical socialist mobilization and fostering the creative talent needed for developing alternative ways of producing and living. As the concluding contribution to this volume by one of Syriza’s leading party cadres puts it: ‘Without Syriza being the hope for a substantial change, Golden Dawn— or something similar— will definitely rise as the dominant political power. Needless to say that this would be the successful outcome of the memorandum period: transforming a developed society (with many many problems of mentality and orientation) into a social desert in which barbarism and fascism will prevail’.

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