PREFACE

We have conceived this 54th volume of the Socialist Register on Rethinking Democracy as a companion volume to the 2017 volume on Rethinking Revolution. As we put it in the preface to that volume: ‘The “political event” of gaining state power, whether by taking parliament or in a collapse of the existing political regime, has proven time and again to be less crucial than the social revolution of building capacities for self-government and the democratization and socialization of institutional resources … The “event”, in itself, … will never be a sufficient condition for the exploited and oppressed to build their own capacities for establishing collective, rather than competitive, ways of living through developing socialist democracy.’

The Wilsonian rhetoric a hundred years ago of an essential opposition between revolution and democracy was reinforced for much of the twentieth century by the authoritarian cast of the Communist bloc countries; and by 1989, the triumph of capitalist liberal democracy was proclaimed as ‘the end of history’. But as the contradictions of neoliberal capitalist globalization have thrown up ever more reactionary responses of the kind our 2016 volume on The Politics of the Right examined in close detail across a broad range of states, the antagonism between capitalism and democracy is increasingly visible. It becomes in this context all the more important to help lay some foundations for the new visions, organizations, practices, and institutions that will be required for the development of socialist democracy in the twenty-first century.

The essays with which this volume opens serve as a sharp reminder that the achievement of what is known as democracy today involved profound and protracted social struggles by working-class people, men and women, which were always resisted by those whose privileges and property were thereby challenged. The concept of post-democracy which has gained such currency in theoretical and political debate as a label for how neoliberal economic forces are ‘undoing the demos’ may be seen as neglecting how far the ideational and institutional traces of these resistances became embedded in ‘actually existing liberal democracy’. And as the essays on ‘neoliberal democracy’ suggest, this laid the foundation for populist appeals in the name of defending ‘our’ democracy
by so many reactionary and authoritarian forces. It is in this context that the deployment of referenda as useful instruments for restoring political credibility have suddenly turned into ‘objects of fear’ for the conventional state managers of globalized capitalism.

Their fear of ‘populism’ is, of course, also rooted in the accumulating evidence of the renewed electoral appeal of democratic socialist ideas and policies reflecting social struggles from below in the current conjuncture. At the same time, this poses sharp strategic challenges for the left today, as is addressed in the essay here that analyzes, in the wake of the Sanders insurgency, what it is about its organizational structures that makes the US Democratic Party so hard to change in anything like a socialist direction. The ascension of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the British Labour Party – addressed by Hilary Wainwright in the 2017 Socialist Register – has even more acutely raised all the old questions associated with the limits and possibilities of democratizing the working-class parties through which social struggles from below have been traditionally channelled into the narrow framework of actually existing liberal democracy. It was surprising enough that Corbyn should have been elected as leader of the party in 2015; even more surprising was how far this came to be electorally validated in the general election of 8 June 2017, through securing the largest increase in the party’s vote in any general election since 1945. While the timing of this just as we were in the final editing process of this volume constrained our ability to analyze this development more fully, in light of the Register’s extensive critical coverage of developments in the Labour Party since the first volume in 1964, some comments on this remarkable new development are in order here.

Corbyn’s own early political formation amidst the protracted crisis of the postwar Keynesian state in the 1970s was deeply embedded in the last attempt to effect a radical democratic socialist transformation of the Labour Party, although this had already been defeated by the time Corbyn was first elected as an MP in 1983. The resurrection of this attempt today amidst the crisis of the neoliberal state inevitably raises the question of whether Ralph Miliband’s sobering judgement in the 1976 Register still holds, i.e. ‘the belief in the effective transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of socialist policies is the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone’. But Miliband’s no less sober observations at the time on the inability of the socialist left to create any effective ‘organization of its own political formation, able to attract a substantial measure of support’ also sadly continued to apply over the following decades – even as New Labour did its worst to bury any trace of socialist sentiment as well as completely stifle intra-party democracy.
Thus it perhaps should not have been quite so surprising that as the crisis of neoliberalism took New Labour with it after 2008, the prospect of transforming the Labour Party would once again eventually emerge as a plausible strategic option for the left in Britain. That the filmmaker Ken Loach, who in 2013 had stood at the forefront of Left Unity as yet another failed attempt to launch a serious socialist electoral alternative, should be found in 2017 making campaign videos for the Labour Party featuring a very broad range of working people demanding ‘the full fruits of our labour’ epitomizes the sudden reinvestment of considerable socialist hope, energy, and creativity in the party under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership. This may be taken as fully validating Andrew Murray’s sharp critique of the Left Unity initiative in the 2014 *Socialist Register*, but he could hardly have imagined then that only three years later he would be seconded from his position as chief of staff of Britain’s largest union, Unite, to the Labour leader’s election campaign office.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the June 2017 election was the greatly increased turnout by young people to vote for the Corbyn-led Labour Party. That this was achieved despite almost two years of constant denigration of Corbyn by his own members of parliament being amplified across the whole spectrum of the mainstream media, as well as against the drag of a central party machine more concerned with vetting than welcoming the new members attracted to the party, was in good part due to the actual momentum generated by Momentum, the organization specifically created to mobilize new members behind (and indeed in front of) Corbyn. With the greatest electoral support coming from working-class voters under 35, and especially from the semi-skilled, unskilled, and unemployed workers among them, this not only suddenly gave the Labour electorate a remarkably young cast, it also signalled a potentially very important shift in the party’s class base.

It is worth noting that the last time anything like this happened was a full half century before in the two elections of the mid-1960s, when a new generation of working-class voters contradicted the widespread notion that class political differentiation was a thing of the past by voting Labour in such large numbers. It was only after the profoundly disappointing experience of a Labour government desperately attempting to manage the growing contradictions of the British ‘mixed economy’ and its ‘special relationship’ with the American empire that a great many of the young working-class voters turned away from the Labour Party by the time of the 1970 election. Of course, an explosion of activism also characterized this conjuncture. That the Labour Party was almost the last place to which these activists were attracted already points to one of the most important differences between the attempt to transform the party
then, spearheaded by Corbyn’s mentor Tony Benn, and the one spearheaded by Corbyn himself so many decades later, which has become the catalyst for drawing hundreds of thousands new members to the party.

The very nature of actually existing liberal democracy dictates that the issue of intra-party democracy immediately comes to the fore in this context. The reasons for this were well explained by Tony Benn himself in his essay in the 1989 Socialist Register:

The British people are regularly told that they live in a democracy and that the Mother of Parliaments is respected all over the world as the model on which other democracies have based their own structures and practices. However, in reality, the institutions of Britain are far from democratic and the term democracy is almost always qualified by the adjective ‘parliamentary’ which may appear to be a minor change but, on close examination, turns out to be a major variation of the idea that the people are sovereign …

The failure of Labour governments in the past is that they have never told the people the truth, which is that Britain is not a democracy, that office and power are not the same, and in the absence of that knowledge people have never been encouraged to mount the counter-pressure that could shift the balance in favour of labour and against capital, and persuade the establishment that they have no choice but to concede to that pressure because of the strength which it commanded. Historically all social progress has always come from below, yet, almost by definition, those Labour leaders who sit in parliament, in cabinets, or in the higher counsels of the trade union movement, have won their own positions by climbing up a ladder called the ‘status quo’ and in doing so have escaped from many of the pressures and difficulties which are experienced by those they were elected to represent.

Any struggle to change this by working within the Labour Party is bound to be long and bitter, and its outcome very uncertain, even after important democratic victories in leadership selection and intra-party procedures. And as was indeed seen in the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy’s decade long intra-party struggle through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the strategic focus to initially concentrate the democratic impulse inward on the structures of the party has the perverse effect of projecting the intra-party divisions outward, blunting the very processes of democratic socialist persuasion, education and mobilization necessary not only for short-term electoral success but, in a longer term perspective, for the party to become an active agent of new working-class formation and capacity development.
Corbyn’s remarkable electoral success in 2017, especially among young working-class people, is indicative of the very different political conditions produced by the crisis of neoliberalism, one marked by a common working-class revulsion against austerity which stands in sharp contrast to the divisions between public sector and industrial working-class militancy that so marked the ‘winter of discontent’ in the transition to Thatcherism. The concern of many Momentum activists to go beyond mobilizations for winning democratic constitutional changes at the annual party conference by investing the greater part of their energies and creativity into remaking local Labour Party branches into centres of working-class life is itself an important element in this new conjuncture. But what above all needs to be remembered about the defeat of the last socialist attempt to transform the Labour Party is that it was the union leadership that pulled the plug on it, including those from the left who had earlier supported it but done little to explain to their members what was really at stake. To credibly stress the possibilities rather than the limits of changing the Labour Party requires posing a fundamental challenge to the very way the party has been rooted in the working class through its links with the unions, reproducing a division of labour that has more often militated against rather than nourished new working-class formation and the development of democratic capacities. In this context, Andrew Murray’s insightful admonition in his 2014 essay of the activist left for its lack of class-rootedness needs to be turned into a challenge to the pro-Corbyn unions themselves to validate their role in the current attempt to change the Labour Party by proving their capacity to change themselves.

The three essays in this volume that focus on the media in Britain demonstrate the role that public as well as private media play in fashioning the bad news that increasingly turns actually existing liberal democracy into a fake democracy. While the 2017 UK election showed that on-the-ground political campaigns alongside the creative deployment of social media can nevertheless be effective, these essays also demonstrate the need for reviving the type of radical reform agenda for democratizing the media that will require going well beyond what is envisioned either in Labour’s Digital Democracy Manifesto or in its Alternative Models of Ownership report. Indeed, the latter’s overwhelming stress on the democratic promise of cooperatives deserves to be critically assessed in light of the two following essays drawing on contemporary developments in Spain: the ‘commons-based’ models of public administration and social innovation now at work in the new urban democratic experience in Barcelona offer an inspiring contrast to the depressing incorporation of the Mondragon enterprises into the dynamics of neoliberal global markets. Still further negative as well
as positive lessons may be learned from the two subsequent essays: the first on the frustration of the potential for rural democracy under Latin America’s recent ‘pink tide’ governments of the left, the second looking to India to draw inspiration from the Communist Party in Kerala’s ambitious state-led effort to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance.

The volume concludes with three wide-ranging essays that diversely engage with contemporary theoretical debates by drawing on the radical democratic legacy of Marxist theory. The Register has always tried to build on this legacy, as was so well captured by Hal Draper in his essay in the 1974 volume which defined Marx’s programme as ‘the complete democratization of society, not merely of political forms …. For Marx, the fight for democratic forms of government – democratization in the state – was a leading edge of the socialist effort.’ We hope that the essays in this volume which seek to further build on this to develop new visions of socialist democracy can serve as useful guides in the many more attempts that are surely still to come in the twenty-first century to transcend the limits of actually existing liberal democracy.

We want to thank all our contributors as well as Maciej Zurowski, the translator of the concluding essay, for all the hard work involved in producing essays of such a high calibre on such a challenging theme, and for being so cooperative with our editorial efforts to make them even better. These efforts would have been much more meagre but for the advice of so many members of the Register’s editorial collective, and especially the highly skilled and committed support of Steve Maher and Alan Zuege on our editorial team. And we are, as ever, very grateful for the way this has been brought to fruition by Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg of Merlin Press, with yet another inspired cover designed by Louis McKay.

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