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Excerpt

THE SOCIALIST REGISTER

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S O C I A L I S T
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**NEW POLARIZATIONS
OLD CONTRADICTIONS**
THE CRISIS OF CENTRISM

Edited by GREG ALBO, LEO PANITCH, & COLIN LEYS

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PREFACE

Leo Panitch, the most brilliant student and long-time friend of Ralph Miliband, who founded the *Socialist Register* with John Saville in 1964, edited or co-edited it from 1985 until his tragic death in December last year from Covid-19. The shock to us, along with all his friends, colleagues, students, and comrades around the world, was momentarily paralysing. This volume was in preparation; it was hard enough to bring it to completion on time without Leo, let alone to write anything about him that could begin to do justice to his 35 years as the Register's editor, not to mention his place in the history of the left. Some considered appreciations have already appeared, notably the book edited by Leo's Register colleagues Greg Albo, Steve Maher and Alan Zuege, entitled *State Transformations: Classes, Strategy, Socialism* (Brill 2021), in honour and memory of Leo's contribution to a critical political science.

Of course, there have already been many commemorations of Leo's life and work in a wide range of publications of the left around the world, as well as in the mainstream press. More will be taking place over the coming year, and the next volume of the *Register* will include several essays reflecting on Leo's contributions to socialist thought and politics. Here, we would just like to quote from three of the dozens of heartfelt and moving tributes that appeared in the weeks after Leo's death, which convey well the emotions, comradeship, and loss we feel ourselves.

From Michalis Spourdalakis, Leo's former student and close friend, in Athens, writing soon after Leo died:

Leo's tragic end reminded us of the unpredictable and often gloomy whims of the end that each of us eventually face, but it also shocked those who knew him. Hard to accept. It is difficult to swallow that he, with his invincible passion for life, and his unwavering commitment and mobilization for the cause of the socialist perspective, is no longer with us. It is not so much the hundreds of statements, interventions, and stories that fill not only social media but also the mainstream media in

many languages, but the number of people who were stunned by the unexpected news, struck dumb by the shock.

I also belong to this last category ... Suspended, puzzled ... How do I squeeze into one article forty-two years of acquaintance, apprenticeship, friendship, and companionship in the movement for socialist transformation? How can I include all his work, his contribution to the social sciences, his contribution to the Marxist tradition, his international and internationalist presence, his ties and passion for our country, our struggles and our culture, and finally his life and his personality?

Exactly so, and we profoundly share the feeling that Michalis also expresses here:

Even though I am a former speed-walker, he was always one step ahead. It was as if he wanted to anticipate tomorrow, to approach it, to understand it, and to project it through teaching. That is why his memory and his example weigh heavily upon us now, so much so that I feel I will never be able to cover that step that always separated us, even in our quiet walks.

But impossible as it seems now, we are bound to do everything we can to carry forward the project Leo left us, a project that Ingar Solty, also a former student of Leo's now located in Berlin, expressed very well:

Frankfurt Schoolers like Adorno are often credited with sending a 'message in a bottle', allowing Marxism to survive the near-successful effort to physically eliminate it in the Nazi period ... The same metaphor extends to the role Panitch and his colleagues played after 1989. York's political science department – probably the biggest cluster of Marxist scholars and innovation in the world – kept Marxism alive through the difficult 1990s and 2000s, only for it to be taken up by a new generation of socialists, faced with today's deep civilizational crisis ...

Panitch's special role also had to do with his ability to write accessibly. While his thinking was deeply entrenched in social complexities and theoretical debates, his prose was crystal clear. He resisted the kind of academic jargon which became fashionable during the 1980s ...

And that way of writing was also a quality that Leo, like Miliband, always wanted the *Register* to have – combining serious analytical thought with clear, accessible prose and a close connection to the politics of activists. This called for exceptional editorial skills and an extraordinary range of

knowledge, as Ursula Huws, a contributing editor of the *Register* over many years, also noted:

It is indeed hard to imagine anyone else on the planet with such a vast overview. He did not just have a horizon-to-horizon knowledge of the literature but was also personally acquainted with many of the greatest political thinkers of our time. He used to boast about how rarely anyone turned down an invitation to contribute to *Socialist Register*, attributing that to its history as a non-sectarian source of quality analysis. In fact, I suspect, it was Leo himself they did not want to say no to. The warmth and charisma that he radiated made everyone want to be included in it. And he bore no grudges, often inviting people with whom he might have had serious disagreements on some issues to contribute their ideas if he thought these ideas deserved a hearing.

All this and more is reflected in the thinking behind the present volume, which Leo planned and commissioned with Greg Albo, and which he had been corresponding about with some of the contributors until his last days. The commissioning letter he and Greg sent to contributors set out the task as follows: ‘With the word polarization now on the lips of commentators on the left as well as mainstream journalists everywhere, we feel it is the responsibility for the *Register* to undertake a deeper analysis of the current political and economic moment by addressing the underlying social contradictions that are producing these polarizations. It is one of the great ironies of our time that, just two decades after capitalism became the singular global mode of production, as capitalist accumulation and social relations finally penetrated every corner of the earth over 150 years after the *Communist Manifesto* predicted this, that polarizations of politics, income and wealth, gross consumption alongside abysmal poverty, of ecological destruction, are there for all to see. What Philip Roth wrote about the personality of his Mickey Sabbath character in his novel, *Sabbath’s Theater*, seems to apply to 21st century capitalism: “What’s clinically denoted by the word ‘bi-polarity’ is something puny ... Imagine, rather, a multitudinous intensity of polarities, polarities piled shamelessly upon polarities, polarities to comprise not a company of players, but this single existence, this theatre of one.” Our aim is that the essays will conceptually and analytically yield the kind of global survey that will help to uncover the generative mechanisms behind the multiplication of new and old “identities”, and not least nationalist and racial identities, as well as party and class polarizations amidst growing income and wealth inequalities, new forms of rural and

urban divides, as well as of imperial and sub-imperial “rivalries”.’

A second year of the Covid-19 pandemic is adding to the polarities in its unequal impact on the global north and the global south, on the zones and classes with access to vaccines and those without, and on public health systems that have weathered decades of austerity with some remaining operational capacities and those on the brink of collapse. As well, the global lockdown to contain the virus brought about the deepest and most abrupt recession capitalism has experienced in decades, reinforcing pre-existing divisions in the world market. The emergency economic stimulus, with both fiscal and monetary policy adopting exceptional policy stances, is now approaching wartime levels, leading many pundits to suggest a ‘return of the state’ (as if it had ever disappeared). But after so many declarations in the past of the replacement of market-driven politics by a new centrist politics of Keynesian economic guidance, more than a little scepticism is warranted. Despite daily reports of unprecedented ‘weather events’ – heat domes, flash floods, raging fires, droughts, constant hurricanes – it is still market ecology and the pricing of carbon that frames the prevailing policy accord on climate change. And in this multi-dimensional crisis, the centre-right consensus that was struck around the neoliberal policy regime has been steadily splintering, with a phalanx of far right and neo-fascist groups inserting themselves into electoral politics and gaining prominence ‘in the streets’ (not least in motley demonstrations against pandemic measures of any kind, from lockdowns to masking).

The observation that capitalism is always characterized by just such economic and political polarizations has preoccupied – even haunted – socialist analysis from its very origins: in Marx’s and Engels’ memorable phrase of revolutionary optimism in *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘the more or less open civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and ... lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat’. In the much picked-over chapter in Marx’s *Capital* on ‘The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation’, the language is just as vibrant but now stark in its imagery: ‘The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army.... Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time the accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.’ Absent from this passage, of course, is the organized working class struggling in the opposite direction. Yet in stating his ‘General Law’ in this absolute fashion

Marx allows us to see that the very ‘inner nature’ of capital is constantly pushing toward a polarization to secure the conditions for extracting value and profits irrespective of the social consequences. That is the system, Marx is insisting, that the working-class movement is up against.

The point here can be made more general. Capitalist development is in a constant process of forming new political conjunctures, as inter-connected forces are locked in mutual struggle within their antagonistic social relations. Such ‘contradictions’ contain many possibilities, as their antagonisms and conflicts develop and intensify – continued reproduction in ever more complex and baroque forms, crises, reconstructions, and even revolutions. The contradictory patterns and conflicts of capital accumulation push the capitalist state into a role of constant mediation of shifting alliances in the turmoil of events and shifting strategies. In the chapter in *Capital* on the struggle over the ‘Working Day’, with the state arbitrating the length of the work day in the general interest of capital, Marx identifies the class relation of conflict and struggle: ‘The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and, when possible, to make two working days out of one. On the other hand, ... the worker maintains his right as a seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length Between equal rights, force decides.’

It is this alertness to the inter-connectedness of struggles that we wanted to foreground in this volume: the ‘new’ polarizations arising from the actual struggles and divisions of contemporary capitalism, understood in terms of the ‘old’ contradictions embedded in the class relations – in all their diversity – of capitalism. We hope such a perspective assists in understanding the forces of reaction that are mobilizing today and contribute to a socialist movement that is actively exploring alternatives in radical organization and democracy. It is to the essays in this volume that we now turn.

The *Register* has been preoccupied since the early 1980s with the policy regime of neoliberalism, the economic and social contradictions of market regulation, and the politics of the ‘new right’; and the left’s political impasse, and the need for organizational experimentation in unions and parties, in the search for new paths to socialism, has run as a constant, equally pressing, concern. It is thus entirely appropriate that this volume on ‘new polarizations’ begins with Simon Mohun’s remarkable ‘Portrait of Contemporary Neoliberalism’. With the massive growth of inequalities in income and wealth being perhaps the most commonly agreed-upon polarization today, Mohun argues that most ‘important for understanding the structure and dynamic of neoliberalism has been the large and sustained increase in income share’ accruing to the richest one per cent. In calling for

radical state action that breaks with neoliberalism to address inequalities and climate change, Mohun draws the blunt conclusion that the ‘divergence between social interest and individual profitability has never been as great as it is today’.

Within the context of the compounding contradictions of ‘late neoliberalism’, a brace of essays that follow also pick up themes of earlier volumes of the *Register*. The 2019 volume, *A World Turned Upside Down?*, explored the new geo-political conjuncture, as Donald Trump sowed confusion about the US’s continued role in ‘superintending’ the world market, while Xi Jinping made China’s claim for leadership in guiding global capitalism. Walden Bello writes from within the social movements of Southeast Asia and from the Philippines, a particularly auspicious location from which to evaluate the growing rivalry between the US and China. His essay, ‘At the Summit of Global Capitalism’, provides a judicious assessment of the growing polarizations and contradictions in the inter-state system as the phase of US unilateral power gives way to a much more variegated world order as part of ‘China’s push for global political and ideological leadership’.

Ingar Solty’s ‘Market Polarization Means Political Polarization’ offers yet a third assessment of this particular moment, in this case echoing themes on the global growth of hard right forces presented in the 2016 *Register* on *The Politics of the Right*. Solty’s contention is that the social polarizations that result from the market processes set in motion by neoliberalism bring with them a political polarization in the form of fissures in the party systems of liberal democracies, allowing the hard right new political space to occupy and permitting varied forms of authoritarian nationalism to take hold. After analyzing the dynamics of this political polarization, he concludes with the gravest of warnings that unless a new organized working-class politics emerges, current political forces ‘are bound to move the world further and further down the slippery slope of liberalism into fascism’.

The market and digital dystopias explored in the last two volumes of the *Socialist Register* have at their analytical centre the longstanding state practices of neoliberalism which promote pro-market ideologies and extend markets and prices into every possible institution and sphere of life. These policies fundamentally alter the ways and means by which we communicate, and replace the old social compromises of collective bargaining, welfare provisioning, and social justice with the ‘inclusionary’ neoliberal practices of diversity and ESG (environment, social, governance) mandates. Many countries have seen authoritarian nationalisms of the right grow and gain power – even win hegemony – in this environment. How these processes have played out in the US during the presidency of Donald Trump, and

the extent to which the Biden administration will accommodate or reverse them, is a matter of some importance for the global left.

Bill Fletcher's essay on the 'Danger of Right-Wing Populism in the US' presents a careful appraisal of the forces marshalled on the right over the course of the Trump presidency, leading to the insurrection of January 2021. Fletcher's longstanding contention, put forth in his widely-noted 'Stars and Bars' essay in the *Politics of the Right* volume, was of the dangers of a right-wing mass movement emerging in the US. Under Trump, Fletcher argues, this indeed occurred as the Republican Party became 'the party of the White Republic'. For the American left, this 'political polarization' means, Fletcher contends, united front work and tactical alliances to combat the far right, but also a left that is 'organized around an alternative set of politics and an alternative practice'. The role that 'fake news' and social media have played in these events in the US, and in the making of the new far right everywhere, is constantly bewailed. Marcus Gilroy-Ware provides, however, an authoritative and sceptical assessment of 'what is wrong with social media', and places the social pathologies they reflect and amplify within the capitalist imperatives that drive the 'misdeeds of the tech companies'. He argues, together with other recent *Register* contributors, for a democratic communications system that would 'cultivate forms of communicative capacity and bottom-up truth-telling' as an indispensable project for the left.

From a quite different point of departure, Adolph Reed Jr. and Touré Reed locate the foundations of the hard right today in the US in the marginalization of the progressive pole in US politics as the link between economic justice and racial justice formed in the 1963 March on Washington steadily eroded, and 'the black political class' became embedded within 'the processes that shaped the Democratic Party's commitment to a programme of retrenchment'. An alternative path to racial justice, addressing black poverty, housing problems, and inequalities, depends not only on 'the continued value of anti-discrimination policies' but also 'building a broad working-class based movement ... [that] might successfully defeat the reactionary right wing'. It is to the prospects and strategies for rebuilding the US labour movement and the left after Trump that Samir Sonti and Sam Gindin also turn their attention in their respective essays. Whatever political space may have opened up with the defeat of Trump, the finance capital that still dominates American capitalism, and the limits of Biden's 'Keynesian' reflation, still constitute a difficult terrain for organizing American workers. Indeed, it is because the obstacles still loom so large that a left that is just re-emerging needs to take steps not to slip into spending all its energies in aligning itself with the liberal-progressive forces backing Biden as opposed

to organizing workers and independent campaigns. For Sonti, this is the challenge of rebuilding the American union movement, notably through campaigns that ‘align the interests of workers who provide vital public services with those of communities that depend upon them’. For Gindin, the US left faces ‘polarized options’; the challenge it faces is ‘to conceive of reforms that change the terrain of the struggle [and] contribute to working-class formation’.

The volume then turns to a series of regional studies of the major states most often invoked as leading examples of the social polarization and of authoritarian nationalisms. Jayati Ghosh provides a penetrating analysis of ‘pandemic polarizations’ amidst the contradictions of Indian capitalism. Guided by the ‘Hindutva authoritarianism’ of Narendra Modi and the BJP, India has gone through ‘the worst health calamity ... for at least a century’, with much of the damage resulting ‘from government action and inaction, in a context of an extremely frail and inadequate public health infrastructure created by decades of underspending’. The consequence, Ghosh argues, is ‘major setbacks to ... the broader development project in India’. Writing as both a campaign activist and a university researcher, Vishwas Satgar sets out the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa as an example of the polarization within the infected population, and of polarized access to vaccine being shamelessly piled on top of the acute polarizations of income and employment, on top of the inequities of housing, on top of ecological vandalism. The judgement Satgar passes on the ANC-led state and ruling class is severe: ‘The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the limits of more than two decades of neoliberalization. A corrupt and failing state was unable, or unwilling, to adequately cushion the shock to a deeply unequal society.’ But the extreme social polarization of South Africa, compounded by the government’s neoliberal pandemic response, ‘has also unleashed a new cycle of post-apartheid progressive resistance’.

The post-Soviet economic and social polarizations in Russia have long been observed, but the political form they now take is less known and perhaps even less understood. Ilya Matveev and Oleg Zhuravlev offer a compelling account of how these developments are registered in urban-rural and core-periphery regional divisions under the authoritarian nationalism of Vladimir Putin. The Russian president rose to power at a unique moment, when ‘political polarization receded at the cost of widespread public apathy towards politics’, which allowed an authoritarian regime to emerge. Until recently the Putin regime was able to rely on the ‘apathetic indifference of the population and general appeals to social stability’. But with the protest movements that have now emerged, even if they have been inchoate, the

Kremlin has not sought to create a counter populism of its own: its objective 'has been to prevent independent political activity of any kind, even ones that might benefit the regime'.

'Brazilianization' was a term adopted by sociologists decades ago to capture the sharpening of income and social polarizations that came with neoliberalism. Under the far-right rule of Jair Bolsonaro, polarization has taken on multiple meanings and Ana Garcia, Virginia Fontes, and Rejane Hoeveler carefully unpack the 'fictitious polarizations' involved in the electoral opposition between the right and the 'centre' an opposition that is being pulled to the right in quarrels over 'cultural values', while remaining within the confines of the hegemony of the corporate sector. This contrasts, they argue, with real polarizations resulting from an organized and combative working class that develops, invoking Gramsci's term, a 'spirit of cleavage', in being conscious of, and determined to pursue, its class interests. That is the challenge from an insurgent far right that confronts the Brazilian and Latin American working classes today.

These cases all point to the contradictions and strategic limits of the 'actually-existing' left today, as it confronts ever more confusing neoliberal policy regimes in states that are turning to authoritarian measures under pressure from a radicalizing right. What is the agenda, then, for constructing viable anti-capitalist alternatives in both organization and programme? This is a question that the final contributions to the volume take-up. Samir Gandesha seeks an answer in what he identifies as 'a fragmentation of the universalism that had historically underwritten the struggle for socialism', leading to a what he terms a 'politics of false concreteness' centred on forms of identity politics on both the left and the right. Indeed, in the absence of a 'left universalism', Gandesha argues, 'we can only expect the logic of polarization to drive an already accelerating authoritarianism, as right-wing demagogues mobilize support based on racialized grievances'. This can only be met by a 'class identity' that seeks a universalism 'in its own self-dissolution', that is, in the struggle against classes as such and thus capitalism. For his part, David Harvey returns to Marx in the *Grundrisse* and, in an interesting and unexpected move, to W.E.B. Du Bois on 'double consciousness', to locate a tension in the making of an anti-capitalist politics. This is the tension between the possibilities – and polarization – found in the creative destruction and technological revolutions that capitalism brings, and the alienation and the loss of 'human potentiality' that occurs alongside them. Navigating the contradictions of this double consciousness is, Harvey insists, 'critical for socialism to have some future'.

Finally, Hilary Wainwright engages in a remarkable discussion with

James Schneider on the lessons to be gained from the experience of forming Momentum as a national campaigning organization, and from the achievements and ultimate defeat of the Corbyn project in the UK. Schneider and Wainwright are optimists in their accounting of the gains that have been made from these struggles and the new spaces that are now open for a radical democratic politics. Schneider's conclusion, to the extent one can be made at this moment in the history of the left, is that 'we need to have a party in the Gramscian sense of the term: a political organization that stretches into society, that has real and organic links with different forms of ongoing struggle – trade union, environmental, feminist, anti-racist, and so on – and has some parliamentary representation and can speak in the country – it has the ability to communicate in a mass way'.

This volume of the *Socialist Register* has been produced in the most difficult of circumstances. We need to thank in particular the support offered by Hilary Wainwright, Ursula Huws, Michalis Spourdalakis, Sam Gindin, Nicole Aschoff, Alfredo Saad-Filho, Barbara Harriss-White, and Bryan Palmer. It would have been far more difficult without their encouragement and solidarity. Alan Zuege and Steve Maher used their editorial skills and political insights to improve the volume, and helped us keep our nerve in the darkest days. Our gratitude is also once again extended to our publishers at the Merlin Press, Tony Zurbrugg and Adrian Howe, especially for their understanding of the difficulties we suddenly faced. The theme of this year's *Register* is not an easy one to grasp in aesthetic terms, but Louis MacKay has as usual provided us with an inventive cover that adroitly captures the political antagonisms we asked the essayists to address.

It is necessary to return, finally, to the sad note we opened the preface with. As well as Leo we also lost several other of the left's most important public intellectuals, contributors to socialist thought, and friends of the *Socialist Register* in the past year: Neil Davidson in Scotland, John Loxley and Mel Watkins in Canada, and David Graeber and Stanley Aronowitz in the US. Stanley published his classic account of the state of the US labour movement at the outset of Reaganism in the 1980 *Register*, and it well bears re-reading in light of the essays on the US left in this volume. All these deaths, coinciding with Leo's, underscore, indirectly, the difficult generational transition the *Register* faces. Keeping constantly in mind the steadfast commitment of these socialists to a world beyond the social polarizations and ecological degradations of capitalism will surely keep us pointed in the right direction.

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