

# Introduction

## The far left in Britain from 1956

*Evan Smith and Matthew Worley*

In 1972, Tariq Ali, editor of the radical newspaper *Black Dwarf* and leading figure in the International Marxist Group (IMG), wrote in the introduction to his book, *The Coming British Revolution*:

The only real alternative to capitalist policies is provided by the revolutionary left groups as a whole. Despite their smallness and despite their many failings, they represent the only way forward.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, the British left appeared in the ascendancy. The momentum of its counterparts on the European continent seemed to have stalled in 1968–69, but the left in Britain continued to experience what Chris Harman called a ‘British upturn’.<sup>2</sup> A surge in industrial militancy and wider political (as well as cultural) radicalism had benefited the British left in terms of membership, activism and the awareness of radical ideas. Struggles and campaigns such as the defeat of Harold Wilson’s anti-union legislation, the mobilisation of the labour movement against Edward Heath’s Industrial Relations Bill, the explosion of left-wing activism in the universities, the beginnings of the women’s liberation and gay rights movements (amongst many others) all served to hearten Ali and others across the broad contours of the left. For a brief moment it seemed as if the foundations of capitalist Britain were being undermined. Indeed, the oil crisis of 1973 provided a further shockwave in the period after Ali’s book was published.

And yet, within a short while, the fortunes of the British left began to fall as sharply as they had risen. Certainly, by the end of the 1970s, the far left’s forward march, which had been gathering pace since the political eruptions of 1956 (Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the collapse of the British imperial system after the Suez crisis), seemed – in the words of Eric Hobsbawm – to have ‘halted’.<sup>3</sup>

Thereafter, the British far left continued to debate how best to react to the changes in the political, economic and social landscape that occurred under Margaret Thatcher and New Labour. In so doing, it realigned itself, fractured and evolved as new struggles emerged to test preconceptions and continually thwart the expected 'breakthrough'. Whatever way you shape it, the revolution did not come around. Nevertheless, the far left played its part in shaping what remains an ongoing historical epoch, challenging social mores and providing a dissenting voice within the British body politic.

### Locating the 'left'

The term 'the left' in British politics is open to different interpretations. It is often refined by various adjectives to discern differing degrees of militancy or radicalism. In more mainstream politics, the term is used to describe the Labour Party and the trade union movement, as well as those on the periphery of Labour such as associated with *Tribune* and the *New Statesman*. In Gerald Kaufman's edited collection on the British left from the mid-1960s, Llew Gardner distinguished between the 'orthodox left' (who accepted the Labour Party as the party of reform) and the 'fringe left' (whom he described as a 'hotch-potch of self-styled Marxists, frustrated revolutionaries and inveterate malcontents').<sup>4</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan's history of the British left places the Labour Party at the centre of left-wing politics since the late nineteenth century, but argues that the ideas and policies of Labour have tended to be more progressive than socialist.<sup>5</sup> Even within the Labour Party, there are those who identify as left wing and those who do not; several groups within the party, such as the *Tribune* group, the Socialist Campaign Group and the Chartist Group self-identify themselves as left wing in some way or other.

Many critics of Labour have argued against such interpretation. The 'left', therefore, has often been used to define groups outside the Labour Party – that is, groups, parties or movements deemed more revolutionary or overtly socialist than Labour. Given such ambiguity, 'the far left' is typically used to distinguish between Labour and those such as the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) or the various Trotskyist groups to have emerged in Britain from at least the 1960s. In his 1987 book, John Callaghan used the term 'far left' to describe the 'Leninist left' of the CPGB, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), IMG, Militant and the Workers' Revolutionary Party (as well as their many off-shoots).<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to David Widgery's edited collection of primary sources on the left in Britain, Peter Sedgwick described an 'independent left' which incorporated the intellectuals of the New Left, the social movements

of the late 1950s and early 1960s (primarily the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: CND), and ‘sectarian’ political groups such as the CPGB and the Club/Socialist Labour League (SLL). Sedgwick wrote that the high time of this ‘independent left’ was from 1956 to ‘roughly 1970’, but suggested that the late 1960s and early 1970s saw an ‘independent left’ overtaken by a ‘revolutionary left’ that comprised the International Socialists and IMG.<sup>7</sup> Within these far-left groups, the Communist Party’s Betty Reid wrote that the CPGB made ‘no exclusive claim to be the only force on the left’, but dismissed its rivals as ‘ultra-left’; that is, Trotskyist, anarchist, syndicalist or those who ‘support the line of the Communist Party of China’.<sup>8</sup>

In this collection, we have chosen to use the term ‘far left’ to encompass all of the political currents to the left of the Labour Party. This includes the CPGB and the Trotskyist left, but also anti-revisionist and anarchist groups, intellectuals and activists centred on particular journals (such as *New Left Review* for example), and those engaged in progressive social movements. Some may dispute the currents we have included – many anarchists would argue that they share little with the communist/Leninist left – but, as the collection will show, there has tended to be much cross-over between the various political currents of the far left since the mid-twentieth century.

### Outlining the history of the British far left

The year 1956 may be seen as representing ‘year zero’ for the British left. Eric Hobsbawm described the impact thus:

There are two ‘ten days that shook the world’ in the history of the revolutionary movement of the last century: the days of the October Revolution ... and the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (14–25 February 1956). Both divide it suddenly and irrevocably into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ ... To put it in the simplest terms, the October Revolution created a world communist movement, the Twentieth Congress destroyed it.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to 1956, the CPGB had dominated the political field to the left of the Labour Party. The party had grown out of the unification of several socialist groups in 1920 and gradually built itself as *the* radical alternative to Labour. The only real competition came from the Independent Labour Party (ILP), whose disaffiliation from Labour in 1932 cast it adrift from the political mainstream. Although sectarianism served, at times, to limit the CPGB’s appeal, the 1930s saw it greatly expand in influence, buoyed by its leadership role within the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement, its anti-fascist stance (sending volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War

and mobilisations against Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists), and its campaigns for peace in Europe. Such advance was halted by its opposition to the war effort between September 1939 and June 1941, during which it followed Moscow's lead in defining the Second World War as 'imperialist'. Come Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, however, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) part in the allied war effort, the CPGB claimed its highest membership figure in 1942 (56,000).

Initially, at least, the CPGB appeared to maintain its advance at the end of the war. The 1945 election saw the CPGB win two parliamentary seats (Willie Gallacher in West Fife and Phil Piratin in Stepney/ Mile End), following which 215 communist councillors were elected at a municipal level.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, the party began to suffer in the face of the anti-communist hysteria that came with the onset of Cold War. Even then, its promotion of a parliamentary road to socialism and a future Communist-Labour alliance ensured that it maintained a foothold in the British labour movement. A trade union presence proved key to the longevity of the CPGB and its survival between the events of 1956 and the 'British upturn' ten years later.

Trotskyism and left-communism developed as two oppositional currents in the Communist Party during the 1920s and 1930s, but it was not until the post-war period that British Trotskyism really emerged as an alternative left-wing movement to the CPGB. The genesis of post-war British Trotskyism can be traced back to the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), which contained all of the subsequent leading figures of the Trotskyist movement and held the position of the official British representative of the Fourth International between 1944 and 1949. The RCP made some headway in the rank and file of the trade unions, particularly by supporting strikes when the CPGB was still promoting cooperation with the government, as well as in the anti-fascist activism against Mosley's newly formed Union Movement. However, the RCP soon split over questions concerning entrism within the Labour Party and how the Fourth International should view the 'People's Democracies' of Eastern Europe. By 1956, Gerry Healy's *The Club* (soon after the SLL) was the main Trotskyist group in Britain, with the others being relegated to discussion groups or journals in this period.

Such alignments across the British left would change in 1956. Khrushchev's denunciation of the 'cult of personality' that arose around Stalin and admission that crimes had been committed during Stalin's reign had a major impact on the CPGB. While many party members wanted a discussion over the CPGB's uncritical support for the Soviet Union, the leadership sought to quash any frank and open debate, particularly amongst the rank and file at branch or district level. As a result, some

members – including E. P. Thompson and John Saville – were moved to publish mimeographed material to reach others dissatisfied with the leadership's approach. Soviet intervention in Hungary later the same year only exacerbated matters, leading to some 8,000 people leaving the CPGB between February 1956 and February 1958.

The trajectory of those who left the CPGB varied. As several authors have pointed out, this was the beginning of a British 'New Left' that sought to combine socialism with humanism and democracy. Divorcing themselves from party politics, Thompson and Saville started *The New Reasoner* in 1957, which alongside Stuart Hall's *Universities and Left Review* became the focal point of the first wave of the New Left. By the early 1960s, a number of people who had been involved in left-Labour circles had come into contact with these new journals and began two new ventures that solidified the left's realignment in the period before '1968': the *New Left Review* (edited firstly by Stuart Hall, then Perry Anderson) and the *Socialist Register* (edited by Saville and Ralph Miliband). What further galvanised the New Left in Britain was the rise of single-issue social movements that brought a younger generation of activists into contact with the left, the most predominant of which was CND. Although most of the leftist parties eventually supported CND, the campaign showed that political activism could be mobilised outside of party structures (or their front groups).

In terms of Trotskyism, the SLL benefited somewhat from the mass exodus from the CPGB in 1956. A small number of erstwhile CPGB activists joined Healy's group, including the historian Brian Pearce, Ken Coates, the Scottish trade unionist Lawrence Daly and the *Daily Worker* journalist Peter Fryer, who had been in Budapest at the time of the Soviet invasion. Few if any of those who joined the SLL from the CPGB were sudden converts to orthodox Trotskyism. Because of this, perhaps, the SLL proved unable to hold onto many of these defectors for long and Trotskyist recruitment soon turned its attention to the youth wing of the Labour Party.

Peter Sedgwick's description of the period between 1956 and 1968 as providing a 'record of a political adolescence' is particularly apt in regard to the far left.<sup>11</sup> The time roughly between the election of Harold Macmillan's Conservative government (1959) and the Seamen's strike of 1966 was one of transition, with several Trotskyist and anti-revisionist groups in incubation ready to emerge in the next decade. After the catastrophes of 1956, the CPGB refocused its efforts on creating a 'mass party' which promoted closer ties with the trade unions and the Labour left in a 'broad left alliance'. By 1964, the party had made up the 8,000 members it had lost less than a decade before. Two years later, and

the party's links to the trade union movement proved integral to the founding of the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions that played such an influential role in the campaigns against Harold Wilson's industrial relations reforms between 1966 and 1969. Even so, the CPGB's shift towards a parliamentary road to socialism and 'broad left alliance' disappointed some in the party who sought inspiration in the Chinese Communist Party's promotion of anti-revisionism. Thus, Britain's first Maoist group was formed by Michael McCreery in 1961: the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity (CDRCU). In 1963, the CDRCU formally broke from the CPGB.

The Trotskyist left, meanwhile, tended to remain inside the Labour Party for the first half of the 1960s. In 1964, the entrust group that existed around the leadership of Ted Grant and Peter Taaffe started producing a newspaper, *Militant*, recruiting inside the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) for 'the tendency'. The IMG also started as a group on the Labour left, gathered around *The Week*. Over the course of 1965–68, however, the activists behind the paper transformed into a political group that joined with other Trotskyists, 'soft' Maoists and left libertarians to produce *Black Dwarf*. By contrast, the Socialist Review Group – founded by Tony Cliff – emerged outside the Labour Party in 1968 as the International Socialists (IS), with a monthly theoretical journal called *International Socialism* and a weekly paper, *Industrial Worker*, that eventually became known as *Socialist Worker*.

Indeed, '1968' marked a moment of transformation for the British far left. A multitude of international events – such as the uprising in France in May 1968, the emergence of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, the campaigns of the Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, the 'Prague Spring' in Czechoslovakia – not to mention domestic campaigns against the recommendations of the Donovan Report into industrial relations and Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, spurred many (young) people into activist politics. Most significantly, perhaps, the Vietnam War and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) served to alter the composition of the British far left. As Martin Jacques wrote in *Marxism Today*, the two major effects of the Vietnam War in Britain were to change 'the international outlook of large sections of British youth', especially with regard to imperialism and socialism, and to inform attitudes towards 'the nature of British capitalism and the forms that revolutionary struggle at home might take.'<sup>12</sup>

The CPGB, of which Jacques was an Executive Committee member, was not among the major beneficiaries of the radicalism fostered by the VSC. With Tariq Ali in a leadership position within the VSC, so the IMG rose to some prominence, while the IS also made headway amongst the

anti-war movement and the student radicals. Infamously, Healy's SLL (soon to become the Workers' Revolutionary Party: WRP) boycotted the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, distributing a leaflet titled 'why the Socialist Labour League is not marching' at Grosvenor Square in October 1968.<sup>13</sup> At this moment, there seemed to be a contrast between the groups that benefited from the radicalism of the late 1960s and the ideas being simultaneously developed on the New Left. The *New Left Review* can be read as an indication of the Marxist theory that grew out of this era (and the worldwide spread of radicalism), with an enthusiasm for non-conformist communists such as Althusser, Marcuse, Poulantzas and Gramsci (and not necessarily the idea of Trotsky). But while these ideas were important for the development of the left in the 1970s, those associated with *New Left Review* had little impact on the practical politics of the period. Despite Trotsky not being read to the same extent as structural Marxists, it was the Trotskyist groups 'on the ground' that benefited membership-wise.

Whatever the ideological underpinning, the 'British upturn' and the fight against Edward Heath's industrial relations reforms saw the far left grow in confidence and optimism. For the CPGB, the industrial struggles and its presence inside the trade union movement made the late 1960s and early 1970s appear as an 'Indian summer',<sup>14</sup> with Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley recently stating (perhaps controversially) that the party's 'most successful achievement was its contribution to the trade union radicalism' of this era.<sup>15</sup> Both the IMG and the IS grew exponentially in size, though this brought its own problems. For the IMG, the inter-party alliance that existed around *Black Dwarf* broke down as the IMG pushed for a more formalised youth wing and emphasised the leadership role of the student movement. In due course, *Red Mole* replaced *Black Dwarf* as the IMG paper. By 1970, the IS had also started to push for more formal leadership over the disparate movements that had emerged out of 1968. Greater links between the new social movements, the student movement and the trade unions (particularly the rank and file) were seen as essential to further political activism. This, subsequently, has been described as a 'turn to class', but the IS' growth (and fear of Cliff's over-optimism about recruiting factory workers) led to heated debate within the group. The end result was the expulsion in 1975 of key personnel, such as Jim Higgins and Roger Protz, with some suggesting that the loss of such experienced members marked the end of the libertarian and democratic IS and the beginning of a slow march towards Leninist suffocation.<sup>16</sup>

Arguably, it was the electoral victory of Labour in 1974 that signalled the end of the left's forward momentum, with Labour and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) settling on a 'social contract' to deal with inflation and limit the outbreaks of industrial action. For most of the late 1960s and

early 1970s, the labour movement and the left seemed to be pulling in the same direction. The 'social contract', however, drove a wedge between the leadership of the trade unions, who supported Labour, and a left that opposed putting the brakes on industrial militancy. Coupled with the economic downturn sparked by the Oil crisis of 1973, the political and socio-economic landscape changed and the left's strategy of confrontation served to isolate it from large swathes of the trade union movement. By the time the 'Social Contact' ran its course at the end of the 1970s, so the relationship between the labour movement and the left had all but fractured.

The result, taken generally, was strategic realignment across much of the left. In the CPGB, a number of party members began to question the tangible gains made by such a focus on industrial strategy and 'broad left alliances', especially if the Labour left and trade union leadership were willing to sacrifice them for political expediency. By concentrating on industrial militancy, the critics argued, the CPGB had discouraged other groups of people from joining or getting involved in activist politics. Accordingly, calls to reform the CPGB programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, were manifest by the party congress in 1977.

For the IS/SWP, too, the 'betrayal' of the TUC demonstrated that alliances with the leaders of the labour movement were ineffective. In its place, the party promoted the mobilisation of the trade union rank and file ('rank-and-fileism') to present the IS/SWP as a workers' party committed to support the localised strikes that grew out of the economic crisis of the 1970s. Simultaneously, the IS/SWP saw new avenues of mobilisation emerging that related to the economic crisis – amongst the unemployed via the Right to Work campaign, and through anti-fascist activism aimed at a buoyant National Front. The latter, of course, facilitated the launch of Rock Against Racism (RAR) in 1976 and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) in 1977.

The fortunes of these single issue movements, particularly the ANL (the biggest social movement since the CND), pushed the SWP to prominence on the left. By contrast, the IMG's investment in the student movement (as well as the new social movements) saw their influence begin to slip away during the mid-to-late 1970s. Though it continued to exist into the 1980s, it became the Socialist League in 1982; an entrant group within the Labour Party that published *Socialist Action*. Militant, meanwhile, slowly gained influence within the local levels of the Labour Party.

It is worth noting that on the fringes of the far left, Maoism and anti-revisionism also experienced a brief fillip in the 1970s. Probably the most successful Maoist organisation was the Communist Party of Britain

(Marxist-Leninist) (CPB (M-L)). Established by Reg Birch, a member of the CPGB and Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the CPB (M-L) grew out of concern over the CPGB's 'reformism' and the party's unwillingness to support Birch against Hugh Scanlon in an AEU election. As a result, the CPB (M-L) had a strong base in the AEU, with Birch's election to the TUC leadership in 1975 giving the party a certain gravitas in comparison with comparable leftist groups. Other Maoist sects emerged in the 1970s, but most only gathered a handful of members. Nor did the Maoists make significant inroads into the new social movements, though some influence was evident among students and, importantly, within South Asian communities in Britain.<sup>17</sup> The main criticism aimed at the Maoist groups by the other sections of the left was that they used impenetrable Marxist-Leninist jargon to propose political strategies not suited to the United Kingdom. Student-peasant alliances and guerrilla warfare, for example, did not tend to translate very well. By the end of the 1970s, Maoism in Britain had more or less faded into obscurity.

At the opposite end of the anti-revisionist spectrum, the pro-Stalin section of the CPGB that had remained in the party despite its moves away from Stalinism broke in 1977 in protest against the revised *British Road to Socialism*. Led by Sid French and the Surrey District of the CPGB, these pro-Stalinists formed a New Communist Party (NCP) that peaked in the late 1970s before going into decline in the 1980s. Thereafter, a section of the NCP's youth wing decided to re-enter the CPGB in the early 1980s under the auspices of *The Leninist*, which in turn became involved in further factional disputes before being expelled in the mid-1980s.

In hindsight, the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 may be seen as a watershed moment in British politics that coincided with a period of turmoil across the British far left. Alongside Stuart Hall's 'The Great Moving Right Show', Eric Hobsbawm's 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' (published in *Marxism Today* in late 1978) captured the mood amongst reformers in the CPGB, recognising – as it did – that Thatcherism represented a fundamental shift in British politics and that traditional Labour strategies had reached an impasse. Reformers in the CPGB believed that the party and Labour left had to work together to encourage the non-conventional Labour Party supporter to become involved in leftist politics and align against what became the Thatcherite hegemony. For many of these reformers, who started to group around *Marxism Today* and the ideas of Eurocommunism, the struggles of the CPGB had to incorporate a pro-actively *ideological* dimension rather than the defensive and primarily economic industrial struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s. Schisms had already emerged after the 'broad democratic alliance' was incorporated into the CPGB programme in 1977, but the

splits solidified and grew after an article in *Marxism Today* by Tony Lane criticised the practices of the trade unions under Thatcherism. The editorial board of the *Morning Star* was generally staffed by supporters of the party's existing industrial strategy (connected to Mick Costello, the Industrial Organiser) who used the paper to attack the ideas being promoted in *Marxism Today*. Amidst much recrimination, splits and division, the party moved closer to its endgame.

In the SWP, Tony Cliff confronted a similar problem to that presented by Hobsbawm – what was to be learnt from the decline of *organised* industrial militancy and the rise of more *sporadic* industrial action of the late 1970s? Cliff's analysis was that it reflected a 'downturn' in the industrial struggle, which he envisioned as a relatively short-term problem (in contrast to Hobsbawm's long-term diagnosis). Equally, Cliff showed concern that initiatives like RAR and the ANL had reached people outside the conventional structures of the left but had not really served to benefit the SWP in terms of recruitment.<sup>18</sup> Sales of the *Socialist Worker* did rise during the early 1980s, to 31,000 in 1984–85.<sup>19</sup> But this may have been due more to the confrontational politics of Thatcherism than any lasting appeal of the SWP/RAR/ANL. Certainly, by the time that the SWP recognised Thatcherism to be far more of a genuine threat than first anticipated (particularly as experienced by the miners' strike of 1984–85), it had lost the initiative on many fronts to Militant and, in some areas, the revived anarchist movement.<sup>20</sup>

The first of these, Militant, had slowly built its base within the Labour Party, primarily through the LPYS. By the early 1980s, a significant number of its members (officially 'supporters') held positions of influence in local branches and on Labour councils. The breakthrough came in 1982–83, when Militant gained control of Liverpool City Council and used its influence to foster local resistance to Thatcher's monetarist policies. Between 1982 and 1987, Liverpool was – along with Sheffield City Council and the Greater London Council – one of the primary sites of council opposition to the Conservatives.

Militant was further buoyed by the election of two of its 'supporters' as Labour MPs in 1983; Terry Fields in Liverpool and Dave Nellist in Coventry. Such successes pushed Militant to the fore of the opposition to Thatcher while also causing considerable distress to the Labour Party. The result was a protracted struggle first signalled in 1982 with the expulsion of *Militant's* editorial board from Labour. On Neil Kinnock's becoming Labour leader following the 1983 electoral defeat, moreover, so the 'witch-hunt'<sup>21</sup> began in earnest, with a major purge of Militant supporters occurring in 1986 and expulsions continuing thereafter.

Despite this, Militant's influence at a municipal level meant that it was

particularly well placed to take part in opposing the infamous ‘poll tax’, which from 1987 facilitated a major reform of how local tax rates were calculated, with the burden of the reforms impacting heavily upon those in lower socio-economic areas. Though by no means the only group involved in resisting the tax, Militant was often the public face of the revolt, with Nellist and Tommy Sheridan both jailed for taking part in non-payment protests. The crescendo of the anti-poll tax movement was the ‘Poll Tax riot’ of April 1990, which proved significant in destabilising Thatcher’s premiership. When she resigned six months later, the initiative of the British left seemed to be with Militant, though this would again prove but a short-lived illusion of potential breakthrough.

The anarchist movement also came to the fore in the poll tax protest. The British anarchist movement of the 1980s had two main prongs, which sometimes overlapped but often worked in isolation: anarcho-punks borne out of milieus that existed around bands such as Crass; and Class War, a more militant anarchist group with its roots in Wales. The anarcho-punks emerged in the late 1970s and mobilised around issues such as pacifism, animal rights and squatting. As the Cold War began to ‘heat up’ in the early 1980s, so anarchists became heavily involved in campaigns against nuclear weapons, particularly the United States’ use of the United Kingdom as an arms base. On the back of this, anarchists were prominent in the demonstrations against the Falklands War of 1982.

Class War began in 1983 and rejected the pacifism of the anarcho-punks, becoming involved in political activism at the fringes of industrial disputes, often in confrontation with the police.<sup>22</sup> Both sets of anarchists were involved in Stop the City demonstrations between 1983 and 1985, but Class War became the primary anarchist group of the late 1980s. Class War mixed publicity in the mainstream press, community activism and appeals to youth culture (such as the Bash the Rich tour of 1987) to promote their political agenda. Though membership remained small, its public profile and publication – *Class War* – gained a much larger circle (estimated to be in the thousands) of sympathetic supporters. By the early 1990s, Class War also engaged into anti-fascist activism in loose cooperation with Anti-Fascist Action.

As all this suggests, the far left changed significantly through the 1990s. Most importantly, the CPGB voted to dissolve itself in 1991, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union underpinning its decision. Already, in 1989, the influence of those writing in *Marxism Today* had led to *The British Road to Socialism* giving way to the *Manifesto for New Times*. The latter was criticised for its argument that the 1980s–1990s had ushered in a new era of ‘post-fordism’ and its alleged deviation away from the centrality of class-based politics. Thereafter, a section of party

reformers forged the Democratic Left as a left-wing pressure group/think-tank, while the title of the CPGB was eventually taken up by those around *The Leninist*. A Communist Party of Britain (CPB) had already been formed by party traditionalists in 1988, after the *Morning Star* divorced itself from the old CPGB but retained links to the trade union movement. As for *Marxism Today*, though undoubtedly an influential left-wing journal in the 1980s, it could not survive without the CPGB and closed in December 1991. Although some have accused *Marxism Today* and the *Manifesto for New Times* of helping to create New Labour, this is vehemently denied by its key writers, such as Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall. Certainly, as Andrew Gamble noted, Hall ‘delivered a passionate denunciation of New Labour ... refusing to recognise it as in any sense a legitimate exponent of the new politics which he had advocated in the 1980s’.<sup>23</sup>

The SWP fared rather better, retaining its membership levels as the CPGB declined. Indeed, the SWP was able to portray itself as a ready alternative – an independent and recognisable party with a widely read (in terms of the far left) newspaper and distinct ideology. The return of the ANL in response to the rise of the British National Party (BNP) also tapped into the heritage of the SWP and gave the party presence. Militant, on the other hand, was somewhat encumbered by the successes of the 1980s. An internal debate raged over whether the Labour Party still represented the interests of the working class and whether the opportunity had presented itself to break away and become an independent organisation. The Scottish wing of Militant parted ways with Labour in April 1991, while the 1991 congress saw a split in the main British party. The majority of Militant members, led by Peter Taaffe, favoured becoming an independent political party; the minority, led by Ted Grant and Alan Woods, chose to remain inside Labour. The majority thus formed Militant Labour, who continued to publish *Militant*; the minority formed the International Marxist Tendency. In 1997, Militant Labour became the Socialist Party of England and Wales (usually referred to as the Socialist Party, but not to be confused with the Socialist Party of Great Britain), the second-largest organisation on the British left after the SWP. *Militant* became *The Socialist*.

As the far left realigned in the early 1990s, so the novelty of ‘New Labour’ and the desire to overturn 18 years of Conservative rule made the Labour Party under Tony Blair an attractive option for many. By 1999, however, just two years after the landslide Labour election of 1997, such appeal began to fade as many drawn to Labour became disillusioned with a number of the government’s policies and actions. This disillusionment was exacerbated by two international events in 1999, which the far left

endeavoured to capitalise on: the anti-globalisation demonstrations in Seattle and the Blair-backed North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) airstrikes in Kosovo.

The anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s was a diverse phenomenon that has been written on extensively.<sup>24</sup> The movement was characterised by a lack of centrality and its autonomous nature, with smaller groups embracing new technologies to organise a range of activities from mass demonstrations to acts of ‘culture jamming’ that involved smaller groupings or even individual activists. The movement tended to be portrayed in the popular press as a violent and unruly ‘mob’, primarily in relation to the rallies organised at events held by supra-national organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, G8 and International Monetary Fund. Taken generally, anarchists and non-aligned activists formed the basis of the anti-globalisation movement, though the organised left – hesitant at first – responded enthusiastically.

Alongside anti-globalisation, the British left (primarily the SWP) campaigned against NATO airstrikes on Serbian forces in Kosovo, a military operation prominently coordinated by Tony Blair as part of a strategy of humanitarian intervention. Many on the left opposed NATO’s operations in the Balkans and viewed military intervention for humanitarian purposes as an oxymoron. But as the campaign brought the left into similar circles as Serbian nationalists, so the schisms occurred. The SWP was accused of knee-jerk anti-Americanism, and the party’s embrace of (electoral) alliances with single issue pressure groups led also to concern that more sustainable party building was being neglected for short-term political point-scoring. Despite this, the ‘War on Terror’ and the anti-Muslim backlash that occurred in Britain saw the SWP further develop its strategy. The party was a key player in the anti-war movement that appeared after 11 September 2001. The Stop the War Coalition included the SWP’s John Rees and Lindsay German among its leadership (alongside representatives from Labour, the CPB and CND) and worked closely with the Muslim Association of Britain to develop a campaign against NATO involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Claiming to be Britain’s biggest mass movement ever,<sup>25</sup> Stop the War led a sustained campaign against the proposed invasion of Iraq and, in February 2003, over a million people marched in London to oppose military intervention in the Middle East. Although the campaign proved unsuccessful in preventing war, it presented a public presence to many who were dissatisfied with New Labour’s enthusiastic participation in the ‘War on Terror’. The SWP further capitalised on this resentment by forming Respect with expelled Labour MP George Galloway, who became renowned for his appearing before the US Senate regarding his alleged ties to Saddam Hussein. Respect

contested the 2005 general election on a progressive platform, focusing on those who opposed the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as disillusioned Labour voters.

For a left-wing party, Respect did well. Galloway won Bethnal Green and Salma Yaqoob narrowly missed out on a seat in Birmingham. Subsequent council elections saw Respect record victories in Birmingham and London. Somewhat predictably, however, tensions between SWP supporters in Respect and George Galloway, particularly over Galloway's political style, led to a breakdown between the two groups. The SWP left Respect to form the Left List for the 2007 local elections, though proved unable to regain the footing it had in the early 2000s.

In some ways, the SWP's policy of alliance and emphasis on single-issue politics has led to resentments similar to those felt within the CPGB by the mid-1970s. Despite protestations from the SWP leadership that membership figures remained healthy, the party has more recently been characterised by a series of splits, expulsions and resignations over issues of direction, organisation and procedure. As things stand, the Socialist Party remains the second-largest far-left organisation in Britain and has established itself to a certain degree within the trade union movement, particularly in Unite. But neither it nor any other party of the left can really claim to have taken advantage of the political vacuum opened up by the decline of New Labour or the schism within the SWP.

More importantly, perhaps, the global economic crisis would appear to contain much potential for the revolutionary left. The evident failure of neo-liberal capitalism has led many to take to the British streets in opposition to the austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, not to mention the widespread anger at 'the system' displayed by the riots that broke out across Britain in August 2011. The revolutions across the Arab world, as well as the Occupy movement, suggest people remain willing to challenge the status quo. The current wave of political activism certainly seems more sustained and localised than that of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Despite this, the far left in Britain has to date seemed only to react to such protest. The left has in no way claimed the debate over the cause of the financial crisis, nor shown a leadership role in moving beyond it. The Occupy movement that made camp outside St Paul's Cathedral in London was a space where the left had to tread carefully, with many involved wary about 'Trots' coming into the movement with notions of vanguardism. Similarly, if the left can claim a presence at demonstrations called against public-sector cuts, pension policy and student fees, then these have tended to be mobilised by institutions such as the TUC or the National Union of Students (NUS) rather than the clarion calls of the left.

The history of the far left in Britain suggests such limitations do not necessarily mean decline. Rather, the initiative – or impetus – tends to shift to different groups and different areas of struggle. One of the constant features of the British far left is its oscillation between periods of unbridled enthusiasm and periods of profound pessimism, both of which may be seen in the left's current analysis of the prevailing socio-economic and political climate.

### The need for a history of the British far left

The purpose of this collection is to explore the role of the far left in British history from the mid-1950s until the present. It is not supposed to be a straightforward and all-encompassing narrative of the left during this period. Rather, it hopes to highlight the impact made by the far left on British politics and society. Even if the parties themselves have not been successful in ushering in the socialist revolution, they have still had a profound effect upon the political landscape in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly through the social movements that emerged since the 1950s. The chapters in this collection, for the most part, do not concentrate on individual parties or groups, but look at wider left-wing movements such as Trotskyism, anti-revisionism and anarchism, or at those political and social issues where the left sought to stake its claim. Taken as a whole, the collection should demonstrate the extent to – and ways in – which the far left has weaved its influence into the political fabric of Britain.

Little history has been written on the British far left in recent years. Since the dissolution of the CPGB in 1991, a flourish of studies emerged to examine aspects of communist history.<sup>26</sup> Two books and two edited volumes have also been produced on cultural, social and personal themes within the party history.<sup>27</sup> Of these, however, only two are dedicated solely to the post-war era (by John Callaghan and Geoff Andrews respectively), alongside one edited collection on the reminiscences of party activists after 1991 and a study of the CPGB and *Marxism Today's* influence on New Labour.<sup>28</sup> That does not mean research is lacking, only that the various journal articles and book chapters written on the subject have tended to be more limited in scope.

Nor has the increase in communist histories been extended to the rest of the far left. John Callaghan's two books from the mid-1980s, *The Far Left in British Politics* and *British Trotskyism*, remain the authoritative scholarly works on the subject, though both focus only on a section of the far left.<sup>29</sup> In 1976, SWP member David Widgery produced *The Left in Britain*, which collected primary source articles into a single volume dedicated to

the period from 1956 to 1968. This was criticised (perhaps unfairly) by Ken Coates for ‘attempting to incorporate all of the post-1956 British New Left under the hegemony of the International Socialists’.<sup>30</sup> Ted Grant, a founding member of Militant who remained in the group’s entrism rump after the split with what became the Socialist Party, produced a history of British Trotskyism. But this ends in 1949 with the break-up of the Revolutionary Communist Party, leaving the history of the British Trotskyism since 1949 to a lengthy epilogue by Rob Sewell.<sup>31</sup> Other surveys from the 1970s and 1980s exist, predominantly written by journalists keen to portray the far left as a threat to democracy or a mirror image to the far right.<sup>32</sup> Michael Crick, too, published two books on Militant in the 1980s as the controversy over the group’s entrism within the Labour Party came to a head.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond these surveys, the main source of information on the post-war British left comes from the biographies and autobiographies of party members. In 1994, Peter Taaffe published *The Rise of Militant*, though Coates’ criticism of Widgery’s book could also be made here with the substitution of Militant for the IS.<sup>34</sup> Tony Cliff, leader of the IS/SWP until his death in 2000, had his autobiography published posthumously. This, essentially, was a history of the party, though containing less detail about the SWP in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>35</sup> A more robust and detailed biography of Cliff was published in 2011 by Bookmarks, the SWP’s publishing house, written by long-time IS/SWP member Ian Birchall.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Birchall had also written the history of the party in a pamphlet form in 1981. More controversially, a biography of Gerry Healy, the original ‘guru’ of British Trotskyism and leader of the SLL/WRP, appeared in the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> This has been criticised as a hagiography to a cult leader who preyed on female party members. Usefully, therefore, Bob Pitt (a former WRP member) serialised a more critical account of Healy in *Workers’ News* in the early 1990s, which was subsequently published in full (with amendments) on the webpage of *What Next?* in the early 2000s.<sup>38</sup>

As things stand, the history of the left’s more esoteric strands has barely been written. Tom Buchanan has produced a history of the British left’s relationship with China since the 1920s, which includes substantial material on Maoism in Britain.<sup>39</sup> The history of the anti-revisionists and ‘left’ communists in the CPGB has also been documented by Lawrence Parker in his book *The Kick Inside* (2012), while Will Podmore of the CPB (M-L) produced a biography of Reg Birch in 2004, published by the party’s own press.<sup>40</sup> At the other end of the British left, probably the most comprehensive account of anarchism in Britain is Benjamin Franks’ *Rebel Alliances* (2006), but David Goodway has likewise written a history on left-libertarian thought in Britain that examines the space between

anarchism and socialist humanism.<sup>41</sup> Two autobiographies by leading figures of the anarchist movement, Ian Bone of *Class War* and Stuart Christie, have also been published in the early 2000s, charting the varying strains of anarchism from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>42</sup>

As editors of this collection, we hope that the chapters included in this book reveal new episodes in the history of the British far left. The collection is separated into two parts – movements and issues. The first looks at particular strands of the far left in Britain since the 1950s; the second at various issues and social movements that the left engaged (or did not engage) with, such as women's liberation, gay liberation, anti-colonialism, anti-racism and anti-fascism. In many ways, this separation might seem arbitrary because there is significant cross-over between the two parts. Most of the chapters focus on events of the 1960s and 1970s, when the British far left was at its height, but a significant number look at the rise of the far left in the 1940s and 1950s and some extend in the 1980s and 1990s, when the far left's influence had dissipated.

The collection starts with John Callaghan's chapter on how the wider British left, in the Labour Party and amongst the intelligentsia, encountered Trotskyism between the 1930s and 1960s. While most chapters in this collection deal only with the politics of the far left, Callaghan reminds us that Trotsky's writings on the Soviet Union and the rise of fascism in Germany, unlike his more polemical work on the Fourth International and similar matters, reached a much broader audience, many of whom were critical of the Soviet Union but sympathetic to ideas of socialism. Reception of Trotsky's ideas by the Labour left, as well as by writers such as George Orwell and Bertrand Russell, was often an entry-point for those who eventually joined the far left. Following on, Paul Blackledge examines the political effectiveness of the New Left in Britain in the aftermath of 1956. Blackledge explores how the New Left broke with the democratic centralism of the CPGB and became involved in single issue social movements such as *CND*. However, he suggests that its avoidance of practical political organisation meant the New Left faded in the early 1960s, lying dormant until the radicalism of '1968'. In complementary fashion, Celia Hughes examines how the political awareness provoked by the New Left in the late 1950s transformed into practical political activism via involvement in *CND* and other social movements during the early-to-mid-1960s prior to the arrival of the *VSC* and '1968'.

The final chapters of the 'movements' part each address different strands of left-wing organisation in the post-war era. Firstly, Phil Burton-Cartledge outlines the histories of the two largest Trotskyist groups on the British far left: the *IS/SWP* and *Militant/SP*. He shows that both organisations have fluctuated between centralism and attempts to engage

with broader social movements – with both strategies bringing mixed (and often diminishing) results. Secondly, Lawrence Parker explores the anti-revisionist currents that flowed through the CPGB from at least the 1950s, feeding into both Maoist and ultra-Stalinist groups that almost inevitably splintered from the party before its dissolution in 1991. Thirdly, Andrew Pearmain looks at another dissident group within the CPGB, the ‘Smith Group’, which was a secretive faction in the 1970s opposed to the political outlook of the party leadership but detached from the more well-known Gramscian/Eurocommunist dissidents. In so doing, Pearmain demonstrates that the opposition groups inside the CPGB were more varied than much of the previous literature takes into account. Lastly, Rich Cross analyses the anarchist resistance to Thatcherism in the 1980s and how anarchist groups, such as those linked to Crass, Class War or Stop the City were able to find political spaces to exploit when other sections of the British far left were in retreat from the Thatcherite onslaught.

The issues with which the far left engaged with forms the second part of the book. This begins with Sue Bruley’s account of the experiences of women in the far left from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Using oral history, Bruley illustrates how the women’s liberation movement inspired political activism but that the far left groups were reluctant to embrace feminist politics beyond the superficial level. Not dissimilarly, Graham Willett describes the relationship between the far left and gay liberation during the 1960s and 1970s. As Willett argues, homosexuality was a taboo subject for many on the left, thought of as a bourgeois deviation and often dismissed as a form of ‘identity politics’ to be consumed by the wider class struggle.

The decolonisation process of the post-war era and the revolutionary situation in the newly independent ‘third world’ is taken up by Ian Birchall. Birchall describes how many in Britain looked to the third world as a revolutionary force that would be an antidote to the pessimism of the working class in the industrialised West. Though such potential was deemed to have passed by the end of the 1970s, such a focus brought issues of race to the fore. Indeed, the final three chapters explore social movements wherein the far left has arguably had the most influence: the anti-racist and anti-fascist movements. Satnam Virdee’s chapter shows that the long estrangement between the (primarily ‘white’) far left and Britain’s ethnic minority workers started to be broached in the 1970s, as the economic crisis of the mid-1970s and the rise of the National Front created a threat to both groups. There was, Virdee argues, improved mutual understanding on both sides to combat these threats, with the Grunwick strike of 1976–78 and the creation of the ANL serving as exemplars of cooperation. The ‘story’ is then taken up by Mark Hayes,

who explores what happened on the far left once the threat of the NF subsided after the 1979 general election. While the NF was no longer numerically strong, fascists belonging to various splinter groups were still involved in racist violence and harassment into the 1980s (and beyond). Hayes outlines the history of one of the groups that was at the forefront of countering this violence, Red Action. Through Anti-Fascist Action, Red Action spearheaded the militant anti-fascist movement of the 1980s and early 1990s but, as Hayes points out, it was also involved in other causes, primarily support for the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Hayes' chapter uncovers the history of this small but influential group, seeking to analyse why Red Action started to waver after the British National Party (BNP) changed from its focus on 'controlling the streets' in the mid-1990s. The last chapter, by David Renton, takes up this theme, examining how the far left and wider anti-fascist movement were wrong-footed by the BNP's electoral approach. Ultimately, however, Renton argues that the left once more mobilised effectively against the BNP and will continue to adapt to the right-wing threat as it changes over time. These last three chapters take events from the mid-1960s up to the present day and this is indicative of the far left's significant contribution to anti-racist and anti-fascist activism, particularly when its influence in other areas of politics had declined.

As noted above, this collection cannot serve as a comprehensive history of the far left in Britain since the 1950s. At the very least, it hopes to encourage further research and point towards new sources relevant to the subject. We would, too, like to think that the collection will spark a dialogue amongst activists in the present era about the history of the far left since the mid-twentieth century and how this impacts upon contemporary left-wing politics. As Karl Marx famously wrote, 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'<sup>43</sup>

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