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Continuing the Struggle in Hard Times

Chapter 12 in J. Pugh (ed.) *What is Radical Politics Today?* London: Palgrave Macmillan (2009), pp. 112-119

Jason Toynbee

I take a grey October walk through a slice of the city near my home. There are Edwardian brick terraces and, further out, semis from between the wars. On the footprint of a factory I see a clump of freshly built, toy town houses. Strangely, a few engineering workshops linger on here and there – ghosts of the industrial past. But the big plants have all gone, and with them the militant labour movement that fired up the city and made it a centre of radical politics during much of the twentieth century.

Nostalgia threatens to overwhelm me as I think about this. It's a perversely pleasurable feeling: melancholia mixed up with memories of my own arrival here as a student years ago. Of course it's an utterly self-indulgent sentiment. For radical politics means nothing unless it confronts 'now'.

Same but different

And now is the neo-liberal moment which shapes not only how we carry on our everyday lives, but also how we fight for change. Crucially, thirty years of neo-liberalism have curbed the power of radicals while at the same time encouraging a new diversity among them. Where there used to be an identifiable 'left', ranging from pale pink to deep crimson, there is now a bewildering multiplicity of issues and campaigns. So, if we're going to do a survey of radical politics I'd say the first task is to try and assess precisely how neo-liberalism has impacted on it.

The main way is through brute power. The coup of Thatcher and Reagan, followed by a host of other governments around the world, was to enable capitalism to operate 'as itself' – red in tooth and claw – and then present the barbarous consequences as the effect of a rational mechanism called the market. Above all, neo-liberalism has delivered inequality. As UN figures show, 'the income gap between the richest 20

percent and the poorest 20 percent in the world rose from 30:1 in 1960, to 60:1 in 1990, and to 74:1 in 1999, and is projected to reach 100:1 in 2015' (Li, 2004). In short, neo-liberalism means redistribution of wealth in favour of the capitalists and their retainers.

That the working class movement has not been able to fight back against this renewal of class power has to do with a powerful combination of worsening conditions of work, authoritarian control and insidious ideology. To take the first point first, a key part of the offensive during the early 1980s was the generation of unemployment. In Britain, the laboratory of neo-liberalism, high interest rates and a restricted money supply forced millions of people on to the dole, especially in manufacturing. This sector was increasingly transferred to the developing world where labour was much cheaper. As employment rates began to climb again in the 90s the new jobs came in services. And here wages were lower and traditions of unionisation much weaker. Meanwhile, cowed by defeats early on in the offensive, and then grown comfortable collaborating with employers, union leaders became less militant. As a result the difference between wages in unionised and non-unionised work places declined. The effect on levels of unionisation has been stark. By 2002 only 31% of employees were union members compared to 49% in 1983. In the private sector in Britain today union membership stands at a mere 17% .

The second factor has been authoritarian control. So, while labour rights, for instance the right to picket, have been cut back, corporate power has been enshrined by the state. In particular, privatisation and 'public-private partnerships' have massively expanded the control of capital over working life, and increasingly over civil society too. On the international stage organisations such as the IMF and WTO have forced governments around the world into acceding to the neo-liberal regime. As a result poorer states have become the victims of corporate pillage. Everywhere, though, the lobbyists of big business are hugely influential ensuring that new legislation reflects business interests while restricting the scope of labour to act in its own defence. It seems that the state, with all its powers of doing and not-doing, has been returned to the service of capitalism.

A third factor undermining resistance is the development of new ideologies. Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no alternative' (TINA) doctrine has been highly effective here – the assertion that private ownership is right, markets are good and that history shows socialism to be dangerous and unworkable. Formerly social democratic parties which embrace this view such as 'New Labour' in Britain have been especially persuasive. Who could have learned the truth of TINA better than the party which presided over the failure of state intervention? Another neo-liberal ideology is fed by a rather surprising stream. As Ian McDonald (1995) suggests the 'revolution in the head' of the 1960s counter-culture has degenerated into a narcissistic project for individual self-realisation. Tony Blair and Bill Gates, from the youth generation of the 60s and 70s, represent a polite version of this. Another, populist variant can be found in celebrity culture, and especially 'reality' TV where ordinary people are transformed into giants of the ego. The effect of the new individualism is to undermine collective action and divert attention from social reality.

To sum up: what I've been proposing so far is that neo-liberalism is actually an old structure of domination – capitalism – which now appears in a new, adaptive form. Same but different. The differences are what have weakened the labour movement, and make it difficult for traditional radicals to fight back today.

New radicals

For new radicals, on the other hand, neo-liberalism is simply the ground on which politics is conducted. There is no narrative of loss here. Rather the traditional left itself appears as archaic, and even part of the problem which a modern radical movement has to confront. For, most of all, the new politics sees the enemy as universalism – of which there are left versions as well as right. Feminism provides the case in point. Launched in the 1960s and 70s, the 'second wave' of feminism demanded recognition for women as women, not as women who were adjunct members of the working class. The same was true of black power, and the gay, lesbian and bisexual movement. This new types of identity politics asserted the difference of political subjects against monolithic and exclusive definitions of what it is to be human.

Today, politics in the plural has become a radical orthodoxy. And it is found not only in identity politics, but campaigns with broad and diverse constituencies. For instance, the Zapatistas in Mexico represent indigenous peoples (previously ignored by the left), but also build alliances with other social movements nationally, and, at an international level, through global anti-capitalism (Marcos 2001). This pluralism, whereby movements are made up of other movements, is partly an effect of the new emphasis on recognition. To call for recognition of oneself implies the mutual recognition of others', and suggests horizontal rather than hierarchical organisation. As such it marks an important libertarian development in radical politics – beyond old-style anarchism towards a new, network based pluralism.

But this is also a pragmatic politics which has helped to keep the flames of opposition burning during the dark times of neo-liberal ascendancy. New radicals are flexible – quick to respond to new opportunities. And they don't try to take on the system by capturing it, or even going on strike against it. Perhaps the pluralism and the emphasis on democratic process *within* radical politics is actually a response to the immovability of neo-liberalism. At least some kind of change is possible, even if it is only enacted in meetings or forms of direct action.

That said, the new radicals have never really succeeded in generating a durable movement. Take the World Social Forum. Launched at Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001, and sponsored by that city's council, the WSF was a meeting of delegates and individuals from around the world. It became an annual event. In 2005 155,000 people attended and, building on discussions there, nineteen participants issued the Porto Alegre Manifesto (http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=276). With the evocative slogan, 'another world is possible', this called for the reversal of key neo-liberal economic policies, the advancement of 'community life' and information democracy. Significantly, it was not a revolutionary programme; there was no suggestion that the demands represented a step towards a new kind of post-capitalist global society. Nevertheless, the manifesto was didactic enough to alienate many in the social movements who felt either that it failed to represent their cause, or that it was simply a centralising step too far.

By 2007 the numbers attending the WSF (held in Nairobi that year) had fallen to 66,000. The event was notable for criticism of the growing involvement of NGOs which, it was said, claimed to represent the global poor yet were in reality compromised through their relationship with neo-liberal governments. For 2008 the WSF took the form of a global day of action around the world. Many have suggested that this low impact event, geographically dispersed and unevenly implemented, marks the death knell of the Forum.

In a way, the WSF, and the anti-globalisation movement from which it emerged, have failed for the same reasons that they initially succeeded. A coalition of diverse groups and individuals, the movement took off because it offered a seductive vision of democratic process *and* critical mass. People and groups talked to one another in common but loose opposition to neo-liberalism, while at the Forum itself participants got a sense of their power palpably, in the presence of others.

Yet without a programme and organisation to carry on agitation on the ground the movement has faltered. The contrast then is with neo-liberalism itself. Far from being *laissez-faire* as it likes to suggest, this political project actually involves the concerted prosecution of the interests of capitalism in a systematic way; via governments and intergovernmental organisations, but also through the trans-national corporation – a world spanning apparatus which exploits and transforms people's lives without any reference to their needs or desires.

This is a depressing analysis for any radical. Neo-liberalism smashes the traditional left, while the new social movements, despite being intermittently vibrant, are incapable of mounting a challenge to the system they oppose.

Crash, bang

And yet ... it is too bleak a conclusion to reach, because it is too Romantic. It implies that radical movements have to deliver their promise of radical change right now simply because 'we have waited long enough'. This is petulance masquerading as politics. In fact what's called for, and I'll attempt it in what follows, is a more sober

assessment of where we are today – something as banal as a balance sheet of radicalism.

First of all, we need to credit the simple survival of activists and ideas. Consider those I have been calling the traditional left. In fact the socialists never went away. While labour movements have been weakened as we have seen, and social democratic parties have shifted to the right, the independent left has continued to organise and has even won some victories. In Britain, for example, the anti-Poll Tax campaign of the early 1990s not only stopped the imposition of this regressive tax, but also brought down Margaret Thatcher. Socialist supporters of the *Militant* newspaper played a key role in it, mobilising hundreds of thousands of people who demonstrated and refused to pay. Today in Britain, there are still perhaps three thousand members of a few left groups who keep alive the idea of the revolutionary socialist transformation of the world.

Secondly structures of power, just like the radical political movements which struggle to overcome or supersede them, are historical. So while neo-liberalism has been presented as a permanent solution to the instability of capitalism, it turns out that this economic regime has actually been built on overaccumulation, and dangerously uneven development across the world (Harvey 2006). Since the mid-1990s there has also been massive ‘financialisation’ – the expansion of capital way beyond the functional requirements of international trade and investment. The credit crunch which has followed, and is now triggering a recession, suggests that in 2008 the neo-liberal bubble is bursting on its own. This certainly makes it easier for radicals to find some space. Most important perhaps, current events undermine the TINA doctrine. So the quasi-nationalisation of banks gives the lie to free market dogma, while the crisis as a whole is rightly seen as a challenge to the long historical reign of neoliberal ideas. After all, these were supposed to provide the remedy to capitalist crises. The opportunities here for making the case for radical system change seem clear enough.

Nevertheless, the Romantic impulse is to be avoided. There’s no guarantee, or even likelihood, that recession and the more intense poverty it brings will lead to a resurgence of working class consciousness and resistance. As the 1980s showed all too well, recessions can weaken resistance by making solidarity more difficult to

build. And there is something else here. If economic crisis does indeed contribute to radicalisation it may not be of the kind I've been discussing. The assumption so far has been that radical politics is located outside the centrist parties and political system. But the first political beneficiary of the economic down turn seems to be a US presidential candidate for a mainstream party, namely Barack Obama. Backed by Wall Street, Obama has nevertheless posed a mildly interventionist economic agenda to great effect. Indeed his popularity took off in early September 2008 just at the moment that the credit crunch bit hard. It seems that this has been enough to win him the election. Thus, paradoxically, the most radical aspect of the Obama campaign – the way that he has become the emblem of a resurgent politics of black identity and recognition – has been achieved on the back of quite contingent support for his come-little, come-lately policies of redistribution.

The third item to draw attention to in this balance sheet of radical politics is looming environmental catastrophe. It's the most Romantically radical issue of all: the threat of the end of the world wrought by the drive to accumulate that pumps through the heart of the capitalist system, combined with a corrupt form of governance which is barely capable of planning two years ahead. Still, it can't be ducked. There is no way of watching and waiting to see how an intervention might best be made. Climate change demands radical action now and on a concerted basis.

Yet as the urgent need for this has become starkly clear, in terms of electoral politics at least, the environmental movement has hardly grown in commensurate strength. Ten years ago it appeared that the Green Party in Germany was about to become a major political player. Now it is split and much reduced in influence while elsewhere, in first-past-the-post electoral systems like Britain, Green politicians are confined to a handful of town councils. Outside party politics there is a good deal more vigour. Direct action campaigns like those of Greenpeace continue to have a high impact and have helped push the issue of climate change on to the agenda of mainstream parties, but this is happening agonisingly slowly.

Saturday morning

I'm standing in front of the Party stall in the shopping precinct, shouting for socialism. I try to break it up with some humour. 'It'll only take you nine point three five seconds to sign this petition'. Or, 'It's pouring with rain and you've got a large soft toy under your arm, but you *have* got time to stop for a chat about the Post Office closure'. This is one of the oldest forms of political communication there is – engaging people face to face on the street. It can be extraordinarily effective. Quite a few people just sail on. Occasionally you get a 'piss off'. But depending on the issue and the 'objective situation' (i.e. how well/badly things are going for capitalism) it is possible for five of us to have a decent political discussion with a couple of hundred people in the course of a Saturday morning.

The hardest issues are the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and immigration. With the wars you often encounter someone who has a relative or friend in the forces. I've talked to soldiers about it too, and this can be tricky. But the thing is to be sensitive while keeping on with rational criticism. 'The war against terror isn't working, and it's not about betraying the lads – we ought to bring them home where they won't get killed in a fight for oil and US prestige'. Immigration is even harder because it's true that some working class people really are suffering as a result. Pious talk about saying no to racism or advocating compassion for people less fortunate than ourselves won't wash. You have to go in quite deep and talk about capitalism, the global division of labour, and the way that people get shunted around the world in the pursuit of profit. It's the bosses and grotesque inequality which are to blame for bad conditions, not immigrants.

I think the point I'm trying to make is that if radical politics is about changing the world (and not merely yourself) then engaging in it today is remarkably timeless. Historical analysis is supposed to give you strategy. And maybe a 'balance sheet' can give you a sense of the pressure points, a feel for where change is likely to come or not. But the task on the ground is always about getting radical politics and its truths across to people: arguing, cajoling and getting wet.

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