

ONCE MORE MOVING ON: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE RADICAL LEFT*

Hilary Wainwright

Introduction

A paradox highlights the problem facing the radical left in Britain to-day. Historically the British working class movement has been one of Europe's strongest: the earliest, the most densely organised, one of the most militant and associated throughout its history with a rich variety of wider democratic movements and co-operative experiments. Yet the British state has remained one of the most undemocratic in Europe, retaining close protective bonds with the financial heart of British capitalism. It is as if some resilient, invisible membrane has separated the labour and other democratic social movements from unsettling the real centres of economic power in Britain. No doubt the membrane has many constituents but one is certainly the highly mediated, indirect way in which extra-parliamentary radicalism is represented – but in effect diffused – by the Labour Party. The membrane is held in place by the **majoritarian**, first-past-the-post electoral system which makes it very difficult for minorities on the left, reflecting radical social forces, to thrive and gain a voice of their own.

The problem of how to create such a voice; how, in other words, to establish a socialist organisation in Britain 'able to attract a substantial measure of support and hold out genuine promise of further growth,' was one of Ralph Miliband's theoretical and practical preoccupations. It was one I shared with him. The idea was not and is not some grandiose fantasy of replacing the Labour Party. The aim is rather to create an independent, insubordinate challenge and spur to the left of Labour.

In 'Moving On' in *Socialist Register* 1976 Ralph looks back over the period since 1956. He concludes that in the intervening twenty years the radical left in Britain made no progress towards establishing such 'an effective political formation'. 'A lot has happened in the Labour movement in these years, and much of this has been positive.' 'But,' he insists: 'in

*I want to thank Leo Panitch and Aleks Sierz for their very helpful comments and suggestions in editing this essay.

organisational and programmatic terms there has been no **advance**.²² Ralph had a rare ability to see and report the left's weaknesses with cool clarity and without despair. In 'Moving On' as in all his political writings, he addressed these difficulties all the better to overcome them.

He analysed the enormous problem posed by the Labour Party. Electorally it is the party of the majority of the working class and the only left party with any 'mass' membership; yet at the same time it is irretrievably tied to the reproduction of British capitalism, albeit in an ameliorated form. Ralph describes how this difficulty is compounded by the debilitating but deeply and widely held illusion that the Labour Party could become an instrument for socialism, an illusion which imprisons the left of the party in permanent subordination.

He then describes the predicament of the **Communist** Party of Great Britain with its significant base in the trade unions, but its inability to gain any electoral representation. He challenges its defensive acceptance of the Labour Party's irrevocable domination of the labour movement. He is contemptuous of its attempts to inflect the Labour Party leftwards while at the same time denying any belief that 'the Labour Party will be transformed into the kind of socialist organisation required to assume the leadership of socialist advance in Britain.'" The CPGB was a party doomed to remain marginal.

Finally, Ralph addresses the question of why the groups on the radical left – most notably at that time, the International Socialists and the International Marxist Group – whose growth was in part a response to exactly the failings he had analysed of the Labour and Communist Parties, had not fared better. **As** he remarks, 'a good deal depends on the answer.' After considering the explanations the groups themselves suggest – ruling class hegemony, the reformism of existing working class parties and their leaders – or the explanations which highlight the sectarian, internally rigid organisation of these groups, he focuses on the inappropriateness of their Bolshevik perspective. 'It is **this** which produces their isolation' and what he describes earlier as their 'lack of implantation.' (And this isolation in turn disposes them to a dogmatic and sectarian style.) By Bolshevik he means an underlying understanding of socialist change based on a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of 1917. He argues that in the context of a parliamentary bourgeois democratic regime, a strategy of socialist advance has to include a real measure of electoral legitimisation.

So his essay ends with a statement of the need for a new kind of party: one which aims to achieve **representation** within existing political institutions but which is also involved in many different forms of action, pressure and struggle. He does not in this essay emphasise or explore the distinctiveness of such a party, with its strategic perspectives fitting into neither

the parliamentary nor the Bolshevik models that have underlain the division within the socialist movement over the last 50 years. He returns to this theme in his last book *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* in ways which I will discuss below.

In 1995, nearly a further 20 years on from Ralph's survey, has the radical left in Britain moved on? Has it come nearer to defining the kind of 'political formation' that could be effective for a strategy for socialist transformation in Britain in the **21st** century? Has it begun to prepare at least the elements that might constitute it?

Twenty years of change

Four very different kinds of changes have occurred in the past twenty years which influence both the character and the potential for a political **organisation** to the left of the Labour Party a political formation with both parliamentary representation and a significant active base in society. At the risk of opening a Pandora's Box of questions, which I have no chance of answering in this essay, I want to emphasise that these changes have also influenced the vision and perspectives of the radical left.

First, there has been the rise of 'new' social movements on the left - indeed several waves of them. These have been an expression of thorough-going frustration with the existing parties and political system. There is nothing unique to the past twenty five years or so in the mere fact of movements forming around new issues of social justice, emancipation, democracy and peace. What has been distinctive about the movements which have waxed and waned repeatedly since the late 60s is their sense of themselves as more than protest movements or efforts to extend the agenda of mainstream parties. I am thinking of the student, feminist, lesbian and gay, ecological, peace and solidarity movements and also many community based groups, alternative or 'counter-cultural' projects and networks, organisations of ethnic minorities and radically-minded parts of the trade union movement. They have in common an explicit sense of themselves as direct agencies of social and political transformation, with their own methods and understandings of political power. From their origins they have turned their backs on the politics of passing the buck: in other words asking others, **MPs**, councillors, parties, to act on their behalf or 'take their problem to the relevant authorities.' Instead they have experimented with a politics of doing it themselves. In the course of their struggles they may make a variety of alliances with conventional political parties, but in doing so they are usually assertive of their autonomy and their distinct sources of power and knowledge.

The historical timing of these movements is significant here: they emerged at a time when Labour and Social Democratic Parties - the expression of earlier movements' faith in the power of the vote and **parlia-**

mentary representation – were in office and had had several previous periods in office. Thus the new radicalism of these movements has been shaped more or less explicitly by experience of both the benefits and the limits of social changes which earlier reformers had believed could be achieved by social democratic governments and their benevolent experts.

Secondly and at the same time, processes of international economic competition and political realignment have meant that both political power and political culture have become increasingly international, and for Britain, European. This has steadily, sometimes imperceptibly, eroded the sovereignty of the British nation state and the foundations of all its peculiarities – for example its centralised character and its disproportional, first-past-the-post electoral system. The external forces of erosion have been periodically hastened by internal pressures from the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. This internationalisation and **regionalisation** has also widened the horizons of the radical left in Britain. Strategic thinking is influenced increasingly by a growing awareness of the paths pursued by the left on the continent. Also, as the importance of Britain and Europe diminishes on a global scale with the industrialisation of the East and South, experiments in the industrial South, most notably in South Africa and Brazil, are providing new models – precarious and tentative – of the role of popular movements in social transformation and in producing innovative forms of radical political agency.

Thirdly, profound changes have taken place in the Labour Party which are likely to alter radically the way the Labour left, who had hoped that the party would one day be theirs, see their future. Some of these changes are common to social democratic parties throughout Western Europe, for instance the promotion, even in opposition, of an explicitly market-led economic strategy and a weakening of previous commitments to public expenditure and intervention. Some of the changes are specific or at any rate particularly marked, in the British circumstances of four successive election defeats. The strategic thinking of the party's leadership ever since the second of these defeats has been premised on the notion that the trades unions and the Party's left are to blame for Mrs Thatcher's first and second general election victories, in **1979** and **'83**. Hence, the logic goes, Labour's comeback as a party of government depends on establishing the party's independence from the unions and eliminating from the party all trace of the radical left. While loyalty to the party and its recently elected leader, Tony Blair, as the only alternative to the Tories is strong, dissent over this particular project of supposed modernisation is widespread. It is not restricted to the left itself but also includes party members who, whatever their own beliefs, are loyal to the Labour Party's founding claim to be a broad church. For the time being, at a moment when getting rid of the Tories provides a unifying discipline, this dissent is subdued. But a sign of

this instability behind the Labour Party avocado stage sets has been the hostile response to the leadership's rewriting of the party's aims and objectives, followed by a debate in which Tony Blair has been given wary and conditional support. The expression of this pent up dissent in the event of a Labour government will be a central factor influencing the future of the left.

Fourthly, the collapse of the Soviet bloc produced a final crisis in the already confused and divided Communist party of Great Britain, leading to the demolition of what had proved to be, in spite of its merits in particular struggles, a dead end for activists, especially trade union activists, committed to building a left independent of Labour. The end of the Cold War and the way it ended, has had wider reverberations for the radical left. Amongst this left that believes in change that goes to the roots of capitalist society, there has long been an underlying divide. There are those for whom socialism was a project brought about from above, an elitist project carried out by a leadership with the support of the people, on behalf of the people, to meet their needs in a rational way. Such a vision has been most closely associated with the Communist Party: Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*⁴ expresses its character and faces up to its failure with a breathtaking historical sweep. But it also has had a variety of champions on the Labour left.

On the other hand is the tradition of socialism from below, a prolonged and uneven process of collective self-emancipation in which democratic state power would play a role that was framing and supporting more direct forms of economic and community democracy and self-management. Throughout the 20th Century this tradition has been subordinate, though with moments of heroic expression and daring experiment. These range from the writing and political leadership of Rosa Luxemburg, through the workers councils of 1920s Northern Italy, to the workers councils of Hungary in 1956 and many of the activities of the student revolutionaries of Paris 1968 and more mundanely, the experiments of Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s. Subordination has also allowed this tradition to survive on a somewhat vague promise. It has inspired many co-operative and decentralised initiatives, but in general it has not had to address in a sustained manner the problems of its faith in the capacities of the majority of people and its objectives of eliminating injustice and oppression of ruthless and powerful enemies. The end of the Soviet bloc and the patent failure of socialism as social engineering from above requires exponents and practitioners of this tradition to face up to the realities of dealing with power.

In this process they will be aided by a further consequence of the end of the Cold War. Political debate is slowly releasing itself from sterile polarities: reform versus revolution, parliamentary versus extra-parliamentary—

and related to this, reform of the state and constitution versus popular struggle, individual versus collective, state versus market. A shift from such polarities had already begun under the impact of social movements, especially feminism.

I will argue that these changes are producing a conjuncture in which the radical left can move on and is tentatively doing so. Moreover, an arduous and sometimes apparently futile process of preparation has been going on over the last twenty years, trying not so much to found a new organisation, but to create and maintain connections of solidarity and intellectual engagement amongst those on the left whose political commitment does not end with the Labour Party. It has been and continues to be a process which does not lay down the form that a popularly based organisation of the radical left might take. Rather it has modestly helped to gather, and nurture, practical and intellectual resources to grasp the opportunities to create such an organisation when they arise⁵. This process has built on the work of the 'old' new left in the previous twenty years.⁶ Ralph was a central figure in both phases. In the course of this essay, I will attempt to draw some lessons from my own involvement in the work of the last twenty years.

New movements and old parties

The foundational change affecting prospects for a new political agency for the left has been the emergence of social movements with a strong sense of themselves as bringing about radical social change through directly challenging the institutions they experience as oppressive. The signs of this were apparent as Ralph wrote, but their significance only became clear in Britain in the eighties – and even now it is a little hazy. Their organisational forms do not have the visibility, formality or longevity of the traditional organisations of the left with which Ralph's 1976 survey was concerned. They are fluid, diverse and often highly localised. I am not assuming that these movements are in their entirety on the left. But a left has been shaped by them and, in Britain, seeks change through them rather than through any of the parties of the left. Moreover in Britain at any rate, this is not a phenomena limited to a single generation or two: 'the class of '68' for example. The movements of squatters, ravers, anti-road protesters, travellers and organisations of the unemployed that have coalesced with others on the left against the Criminal Justice Bill, now meet regularly to develop what they explicitly describe as a 'Do-It-Yourself (DIY) politics'.

Before reflecting on **their** distinctiveness and on how far they do represent a moving on, it is important to clarify that the description 'new' does not imply that these movements are counterposed or invariably separate from workers' organisations originating in earlier decades. In Britain a complex lattice work of connections has grown up in which

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

feminists, eco-, peace or anti-racist activists, for example, have had considerable influence on both the policies and ways of organising of the trade unions and vice versa. This process has been uneven and primarily at a local and regional level, but its significance is that the politics of the social movement left is backed by some of the sources of power of the 'old' labour movement; and on the other hand the labour movement has, through the work of these new movement activists, reached constituencies beyond the scope of its traditional, often inflexible and inward-looking, procedures.

One example of these interconnections is the tradition of women's support groups in strikes of mainly male workers. It started with feminists and pro-trade union women in the communities surrounding the Oxford car factories in the early 1970s who organised to counter right-wing housewives seeking to undermine the strikes of car workers resisting new more exploitative work systems. It reached a peak with the extra-ordinary alliance of women in the mining communities, urban feminists, lesbian and gay activists, black groups and rank and file Labour Party and trade union activists, that came together to support the miners in 1984/85. Other examples are the ways in which socialist feminists have worked with trade unions like the shopworkers union USDAW, parts of the textile unions, and the **T&GWU** to reach out to home workers, especially women, who are best reached through community organising. Further connections include the links the peace movement made and continues to make with some workers in the arms industry; the links between radical scientists and trade unionists over health and safety and the environment, and more recently, local trades councils in towns like Coventry working with animal rights activists against the export of live animals.

In his last book *Socialism For a Sceptical Age* Ralph did address the emergence of new social movements. He recognised that many on the left in the past 25 years or so have found involvement in social movements to be both far more politically effective and more personally satisfying than life in existing political parties. Moreover he acknowledged that movement criticisms of left parties were generally valid and that new movements had been highly successful in forcing upon these parties 'questions they had in an earlier epoch tended to relegate to the periphery of their concerns, or to ignore altogether.' But he insists that, be this as it may, 'parties of the Left do remain of primary importance as a potential, if not actual, instrument of socialist advance.' In defence of this conclusion, he notes the ways that movements wane when the issues that brought them to the fore lose their mobilising force. He points to the experience of the US, a country without a socialist party where, even though there is no shortage of grass roots movements, conservatism holds sway and has been hugely successful in warding off any serious challenge from the left.

After an assessment of the present state and future potential of left parties and movements in the **post-Cold War** world, he concludes that the radical left's best hope lies with strengthening the left in social democratic parties. He says: 'Ultimately, the best that the left can hope for in the relevant future in advanced capitalist countries (and for that matter elsewhere as well) is the strengthening of left reformism as a current of thought and policy in social democratic **parties.**'⁸

This appears to represent quite a significant shift from the position he arrived at in the conclusion to the second edition of *Parliamentary Socialism* in 1972. Here he analysed how the lack 'at present' of any effective challenge to an overwhelming preponderance of the Labour Party 'as "the party of the left" helps to explain why so many socialists at the grass roots of the party, the trade unions and even the Communist Party, cling to the belief that the Labour party will eventually be radically **transformed.**' He ends sternly with both a reprimand and a prescription: 'But the absence of a viable socialist alternative is no reason for resigned acceptance or the perpetuation of hopes which have no basis in political reality. On the contrary, what is required is to begin preparing the ground for the coming into being of such an alternative . . .'⁹

I don't think his argument in *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* is in fact a rejection of this earlier position. It is a particular way of addressing practical and immediate questions of governmental power – a pressing problem after 16 years of brutal Conservative rule. But it can still incorporate the idea of an independent party of the radical left. Ralph's notion of strengthening left reformism depends on the vitality of the left outside Social Democratic Parties as well as, perhaps even more than, inside them. Indeed Ralph notes that 'the emergence of new socialist parties in many countries is one of the notable features of the present time . . . Their growth is essential if the left is to **prosper.**'¹⁰ He was thinking presumably of the Socialist People's Party which regularly wins between 12 and 17% of the vote in Denmark; the Left Socialists in Norway, a decisive influence in the campaign for a 'no' vote in the referendum on membership of the European Union; the United Left in Spain, formed out of parts of the defunct Spanish Communist Party, the left of the nationalist movements and the independent left from the 1980s to campaign against Spain's membership of NATO; the Green Left in Holland, another product of several left parties, working in close alliance with a variety of social and trade union movements. Above all he was thinking transatlantically of the Workers Party of Brazil, a relatively new party based on the militant workers, peasant and urban social movements of modern Brazil: a party which fights and sometimes wins elections at every level (with the exception, after high hopes, of the top elective job of President) but whose driving strategy for social change rests on grass roots organisation amongst

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

the movements that are its base."

The notion of alliances and coalitions is essential to these new left formations. Their implicit conception of alliances works in two directions: first, sideways, as it were, to other political parties and secondly, outwards to autonomous movements and campaigns. First, an element in their strategy as parliamentary parties involves alliances with – or conditional support for – other parliamentary parties, most notably Social Democratic Parties, to pursue legislative support and gain public resources for radical policies often initiated by movements outside conventional politics. **As** Ralph says, these parties are not likely to supplant Social Democratic Parties but to act as a spur and a challenge.

In Northern Europe, under proportional electoral systems, it is often the case that Social Democratic Parties have depended on the support of either liberal or centre right parties in order to govern. There is growing pressure on them, to look to their left and consider a federal coalition – already a reality in several regions – with the party on their left, for instance in **Germany**, the Greens. Similarly in Holland and Denmark at a local level there are many examples of the radical left governing in coalition or giving conditional support to a social democratic majority.

An important example of a relatively open and publicly valued process of negotiated and conditional alliances between a party of the socialist left and a social democratic government is emerging in South Africa in the relation between the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the moderate leadership of the ANC. The relationship no doubt is fraught with tensions and is probably dependent for whatever stability it has on the many decades of common struggle through which all those involved have come. Nevertheless its development could provide important lessons for the North. Central to the **SACP's** influence is its base in the ANC and trade union movements that became so powerful in South African society in the course of the struggle against apartheid.

This experience illustrates the other direction in which the notion of alliances is so important to the new parties of the left: alliances between parties and autonomous social movements.

Here too Ralph recognised a new possibility, an opportunity for 'moving on'. 'In Marxist thought,' he reminds us, 'dual power has always been taken to mean an adversary relation between a revolutionary movement operating in a revolutionary situation, and a bourgeois government under challenge from that movement. It is, however, possible to think of dual power in different terms: as a partnership between socialist government on the one hand and a variety of grassroots agencies on the other.'¹²

To be effective such a partnership could not be one that was formed the day after an election victory, Consequently this idea must apply to the

relation between socialist parties and grass roots movements long before the former achieved office. The exemplary case of such partnership would be the Brazilian Workers Party and its close relation with a variety of autonomous movements and campaigns including the radical trade union movement (CUT).

These two conceptions of alliances (both with other political parties and with autonomous social movements) are implicit in the activities of new left parties in Western Europe. They point to a form of party that is modelled on neither existing Social Democratic or Labour Parties nor of Communist Parties of the past. Certainly, when I talk here of moving on towards an organisation of the radical left in Britain, I am imagining a party which, though in part born out of struggles within these traditional parties – and the lessons drawn from their failures – has a distinctive character that is greatly influenced by both the agendas and the implicit methodology of the new movements – the feminist, green, anti-racist and 1980s **peace/anti-Cold War** movements in particular.

Questions of political methodology

The influence of these movements on the programmes of all parties on the left, old as well as new, is well known. Less analysed but equally important is the question of methodology: principles of organisation, approaches to power, views of knowledge and of whose knowledge matters. In Britain, where the space for the new left to develop politically has been notably cramped, the explicit development of a new political methodology is a vital condition for moving on. So I will summarise my own assessment of important elements of the **methodological** differences.

My argument is that in practice, though not yet in any systematic theory, these movements from the late sixties onwards have been pioneering a new and distinct **form** of political agency in often instinctive revolt at the pompous irrelevance of conventional politics to the problems of everyday life. It is not that everything they do is entirely novel or notably coherent. It is rather that across the movements that have developed independently of established political parties, certain common themes can be identified in the ways that they organise, develop policies and more generally mobilise new sources of power. These themes seem to me to come from a common experience of both the limits of government in parliamentary democracies (and the state that ruled in the name of socialism in the East) and the personal and environmental costs of an overarching emphasis on the priority of economic growth – whether under private ownership or public.

The theme on which I will elaborate, because of its fundamental character – it is not of course the only methodological theme – concerns the character and organisation of knowledge. Discussions about knowledge are not normally the stuff of politics. But state and party institutions are **under-**

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

pinned by presuppositions about the character of knowledge and its organisation – for example what constitutes valid knowledge; what knowledge matters to political decisions; who carries or holds politically significant knowledge. Normally these presuppositions are just part of the culture of an institution that people inherit and duly reproduce or more or less unconsciously modify. But when these institutions fail to live up to the expectations of significant numbers of people and/or break down, and when people organise radically to transform them, a counter culture emerges, and the old presuppositions are laid bare. Thus as the traditional parties of the left (the main subjects of Ralph's 1976 survey) failed adequately to respond to the new and radical demands of feminism, ecology, sexual liberation, radical trade unionism and the anti-Cold War politics of the peace movement, competing conceptions of knowledge became important in political debate. This is one aspect of the widespread interest among movement and left activists, at different times in the critical theory of Marcuse and Habermas, in the 'post-modernism' of Foucault and Derrida and more recently the critical realism of Bhaskar. Unfortunately, however, these philosophical debates have rarely been explicitly anchored in questions of political agency. Indeed some tendencies of post-modernism have in effect denied the efficacy of purposeful political activity.¹³ Without entering into these debates on this occasion¹⁴ I will indicate the importance of the challenge of recent social movements to presumptions of traditional parties of the left to be able to centralise and codify the knowledge necessary for social change. I will also highlight the importance of this for questions of political organisation.

The old methods of Social Democratic and Labour Parties on the one hand and Communist Parties on the other, differ in important ways, and historically there are many varieties of each. But they share similar roots which have produced features common to both. Both kinds of parties, for instance, have traditionally tended either to take social movements under their wing: 'our **womens/peace/tenants** movement', 'This Great Movement of Ours' or, if the movement is too stropy to be embraced, to give them leper status and treat them as 'outside **our/the** movement' – and presumably irrelevant and doomed. Their underlying assumption is that power for change lies overwhelmingly through steering the nation state, in the case of social democratic parties, or in effect, becoming the state in the case of Communist Parties.

My purpose is to highlight the way that a common focus on the nation state (i.e. a single focus of popular sovereignty) and with it, the party, as a single focus of the power to transform, has been underpinned by assumptions about the character of social and economic knowledge. The understanding of knowledge that shaped state action and especially the use to which social reformers desired to put the state was based on the model

of the natural sciences. It was an understanding which first developed alongside the ideal of the nation state in the 18th and 19th centuries. This model aspired to formulate general laws describing regular conjunctions of events or phenomena. These laws then provided the premises from which social as well as natural science was thought to be able to make certain predictions and gain evermore perfect knowledge as the discovery of further generalisations progressed. Historically this positivistic model had a progressive impact, countering the reactionary influence of religious faith and superstition on medical, physical and social intervention. It has now been criticised and surpassed in many different ways. For my concern with the politics of knowledge the crucial point is that when applied to the study and reform of society, it assumed that general 'scientific' laws were the only valid form of knowledge, hence dismissing the practical, often tacit, uncodified and sometimes uncodifiable knowledge of the majority of people. This in turn favoured a social engineering approach to the process of social change: change from above by those who know the mechanics of society.

In the early 1980s in Britain and in a more sweeping form in the former Soviet bloc in the early 90s, free-market ideology rose from the intellectual grave to challenge this from the right. The theoretical case for the **free-market** elaborated and propounded most effectively by Frederick Hayek throughout his long life, challenged the possibility of democratic collective **intervention** in the market. This attack on what Hayek saw as invariably a disastrous social engineering was based on a theory of the economic uses of knowledge which celebrated the intimate knowledge of the individual consumer or entrepreneur. My argument concerning the importance of recent democratic social movements is that in their practice they hold out an alternative to the engineering model of social change – and all the mechanistic ways of **organising** and 'intervening' which flow from it – **from the** left. Hence a critical theorisation of the innovatory features of their practice provides tools for a more convincing reply to the right than could be made in the past. Their practice combines both a striving towards purposefully bringing about an intended social outcome, with a recognition of the practical, sometimes uncodifiable and hence non-predictive character of much socially and politically important knowledge. Their forms of organisation are frequently shaped specifically for the purpose of socialising, sharing the kinds of 'inside' knowledge unavailable to centralised state and party institutions. It is collective and not individualistic.

This does not imply an uncritical acceptance of whatever practical knowledge is offered by a movement's membership on the spurious grounds that knowledge from experience has its own inherent truth, 'I am a woman; the knowledge that comes from my experience as a woman is

valid; therefore whatever I say about women's oppression must be true.' But central to the debates in these movements has been the problem of collectively arriving at some agreed solution that is based on taking seriously, without critically accepting, everyone's practical knowledge and drawing on appropriate historical and theoretical knowledge. The methodology developed from this gives the lie to the right's presumption that the choice is between state and market; the fantasy of a central brain versus the pragmatic reality of atomised economic man.

Robert Michels in formulating his 'the iron law of oligarchy' provides, albeit unintentionally, the best description of how the social engineering model of social scientific knowledge underpinned the methods of the traditional parties of the left. Writing about the Social Democratic Party in Germany before World War I, he formulated his law before the founding of the Third International. But much of what he says about the parties of the Second International is apposite to the Third. He believes that in any political organisation, however formally democratic, there is an unavoidable degree of specialised expertise owned by a professional elite which, whatever the procedures for accountability, becomes autonomous from 'the masses', grass roots or base. These, as the term 'the masses' implies, are understood as undifferentiated in their interests and passive in their knowledge. Michels assumes that they are capable only of knowing with which elite their interests lie, and lack the expertise to know, even partially, how those interests might be met.

Michels took as a 'given' – in accord with the philosophical orthodoxy of his time – the exclusive importance of scientific or professional knowledge and the incompetence or ignorance of the masses. 'In all the affairs of management for whose decision there is requisite specialised knowledge . . . a measure of despotism must be allowed and thereby a deviation from the principles of pure democracy. From the democratic point of view this is perhaps an evil, but it is a necessary evil. Socialism does not signify everything by the people, but everything for the **people**'.¹⁵ Several important assumptions lead Michels to this conclusion. First is the idea that the only knowledge relevant to the efficacy of the party is a technical, positivistically construed scientific knowledge that is inaccessible to the ordinary member and, once learnt by an official of the party, sets him or her apart from the members. Possession of knowledge in Michels' terms 'emancipates (the officers) from the masses and makes them independent of their control'.

Second, there is the assumption that facts and values are entirely separate: that the members are capable simply of establishing the party's values. The party then appoints or elects an official to collect the appropriate facts, which is a purely technical matter and depends on specialised knowledge. Parties based on these assumptions have structures for

THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1995

involving the members in taking decisions of principle – assumed to be entirely separate from questions of implementation. They also have an extensive staff which works with the executive to implement and elaborate these policies. A gulf develops between the members and the leadership because the former have little basis on which to judge the appropriateness of the executive's work from the standpoint of the principles in which they believe. Where they believe the executive to be wrong they have little basis on which to argue for an alternative. They are in effect politically **deskilled**.

Michels also assumed that a socialist party's energies must unavoidably be fixed on a single goal, around a single locus of power: the goal of capturing the wheel of state power to steer it towards socialism. Organisation, it was assumed, is 'the only means for the creation of a collective will'. And organisation, according to Michels, is based on 'the principle of least effort, that is to say, upon the greatest possible economy of energy'. The metaphors for the kind of party this produced were, not surprisingly, military and mechanical: the party is divided into the 'rank and file' and the 'officers' – an efficient party is also an effective 'electoral machine'. Michels' client party is also an effective 'electoral machine'. Michels remarks, from his observations, that 'there is hardly one expression of military tactics and strategy, hardly a phrase of **barrack** slang which does not recur again and again in the leading articles of the socialist press'. Efficiency in capturing state power required that the specialised elite ruled as standardised an organisation as possible. Corners of autonomous activity undermined the party. Centralisation made for economies of effort.

Given the underlying political culture which he describes, the iron law of oligarchy does indeed hold. He was writing, however, from within this culture. Having the perspicacity of a trained sceptic he identified its fundamental features, of which many a party cadre, believing the party's democratic rhetoric, would hardly have been conscious. He treats these features as the unavoidable 'givens' of socialist political agency.

Existing new left parties in Europe illustrate radically distinct principles from those of traditional Communist or Social Democratic Parties on all these issues of underlying methodology. First, there is a recognition of sources of knowledge of social needs and possible solutions not encompassed by the kinds of scientific – or 'top down' – knowledge available to a state or party leadership. The second principle involves a recognition of diverse sources of power to change. This stems from the understanding which activists in recent movements have of the power to bring about social change; a view based on **an alertness** to their own complicity in reproducing and therefore potentially in transforming social institutions. **As** a result they have identified spheres of everyday life – sexual and familial relations, food consumption and distribution, housing **arrange-**

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

ments, transport, work – where non-compliance or experimentation with alternatives can be a source, however limited, of political power, especially if it is exercised in combination with more traditional sources – strike action, political representation, demonstrations. This leads at best to a recognition of quite different political functions requiring quite distinct ways of organising: the organising necessary to build and spread a grass roots movement or to sustain a co-operative business alongside for example, the organising necessary to achieve political representation. So for instance in the Dutch Green Left, the obligations of party membership are based on the assumption that many party members are active in movements that are autonomous of the party, something the party supports. Moreover, on the party's election list and among their **MPs** are people who are known mainly as leaders of local movements rather than as party spokespeople, though they support the party's aims.

Knowledge and power are closely related instruments for any effective agency or process of social change. These parties have experimented with new methods of organising which recognise that they have no monopoly of the knowledge and power necessary for changes they desire. The newer parties such as the German Greens (1979) and the Dutch Green Left (1989) see themselves as political voices for movements which are independent but in close association with the party.

Crucial to these new ways of organising is the influence of the movements themselves – including a degree of learning from their failures and limitations. This is why, of all the various changes over the last two decades, I consider the emergence of the new movements as fundamental to the possibilities of 'moving on'. When Ralph wrote in 1976, the old models had reached an impasse, but no new principles of political **organisation** had emerged. One still cannot talk about a clear and proven new model of left political agency anywhere, least of all in Britain. On the continent, especially Northern countries, the new left parties are an accepted part of public political debate. But even there the impact of the new politics is not assured. Its development depends on the strength of movements outside the political systems. Old methods have a subtle, unconscious pulling power, drawing supposedly innovating organisations back into well established grooves, especially when the objectives of these organisations include public office. This has been a recurrent source of division in the German Greens for instance. They introduced a variety of measures, for example that people should only hold positions of leadership for a limited period (the principle of rotation); that there should always be several spokespeople; that all leading bodies should be made up of at least 50% women. The old methods appear to present the easiest route, especially when, as with West Germany's parliamentary state, they are backed by enormous resources; or as in Britain, where in the past beguiling

short cuts to office via taking over sometimes hollow structures of the Labour Party, tempt social movement radicals to devote themselves to committee room manoeuvring. On the other hand occasionally, for example in London in the late 70s and early 80s, it was of great importance for the whole of the radical left that some activists *were* prepared to devote several years to the plotting and manoeuvring – as well as some very creative policy work – necessary to win control of the London Labour Party and hence the Greater London Council. Perhaps this will be a permanent tension, inherent in the very nature of political organisations whose source of radicalism rests on the knowledge and power of grass roots movements but whose stability and lasting, cumulative political impact requires at least a foothold within the existing political system.

Challenges to national sovereignty; openings for the left

But National state institutions and the parties that cleave to them, particularly those of the British state, are being shaken by economic **globalisation** and political reconfiguration. In the case of Britain, this is an erosion taking place from Europe and from the nations and regions of the UK; it is taking place through institutional changes from above and cultural shifts and organisational innovations from below. Over the past twenty years or so these international developments have stimulated ambitious initiatives from movements on a European scale, whether of an economic kind: workplace trade union leaders developing organised links with equivalent leaders on the continent in industries as diverse as pharmaceuticals, cars and chocolate; or involving previously unorganised workers like the European network of homeworkers; or of a directly political kind, for instance the powerfully pan-European peace movement of the 1980s. Moreover the regional, national and continental challenges to the unitary and centralised British state are opening opportunities by which these movements and other radical social forces could gain more radical political representation.

As processes of globalisation have become apparent, movement forms of **organisation** have proved more able to mobilise effective kinds of international knowledge and power than political parties whose strategies for change have been exclusively focused on national state power. This comparison should not be exaggerated, because the overwhelming political reality that has accompanied globalisation is the victory of neo-liberalism. Those challenges that have in any way dented the right, however, owe much to the distinctive organisational reach of recent social movements.

A good example of the ability ~~that~~ radical movements have developed to think and organise strategically on an international scale is the peace movement of the early 80s. For a brief but vital moment it influenced the course of European history, in particular the way the Cold War ended. My

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

argument here is not that this movement brought about the end of the Cold War. It was the process of implosion and conscious democratic reform in **Gorbachev's** Soviet Union that was the prime historic moving force which led eventually to the fall of the wall. But if the hawks in the Western alliance had been unchallenged in the period when Gorbachev called Reagan's bluff and responded to the West's 'Zero Option' – exchanging the scrapping of cruise for that of **SS20s** – with his offer to dismantle **SS20s** and negotiate a nuclear free Europe, perestroika and glasnost would probably not have had the time and space to gather the momentum they did. The pan-European peace movement, with its East-West **networks**; its ability to mobilise simultaneously across Western capitals; its ability to gather, piece together and publicise strategic intelligence on NATO, had an impact on West European public opinion which politicians could not ignore. The West's initial offer of the 'Zero Option' was itself an attempt to defuse the popular anxiety about the siting of cruise missiles across Western Europe. It was made in ignorance of the changes taking place in the Soviet bureaucracy and on the assumption that the Soviet response would be inadequate. The peace movement knew differently. Their contacts gave them an inside knowledge – some would say also a little influence – which gave them greater insight into the momentous processes that were **underway**.²⁸

They did not pack up the camps that **surrounded** the missile sites, or lift their pressure on all political parties to see the Zero Option through. The result was that the NATO powers, contrary to the initial personal preferences of Thatcher and Reagan, responded favourably to Gorbachev and entered into serious negotiations one of whose by-products was the precarious and unstable path of perestroika. If the peace movement had been powerless and the hawks had had their way, Gorbachev would probably have been rebuffed. **As** a result, the ending of the Soviet bloc would very likely have been much longer and more drawn out and marked by the kind of violence and state resistance that suppressed the students at Tiananmen Square. In this sense the European peace movement of the 80s influenced history in a way that no national party was able to. Its full goals – the dismantling of Cold War institutions in the West as well as the East – are as yet unfulfilled, but its distinctive political capacities helped to create the international conditions that favoured the generally peaceful way in which the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe brought down their side of the Iron Curtain.

In any cool assessment of the importance of recent grass roots movements for socialist change, **these** periods of sustained activity and partial success must be balanced by a recognition of how quickly movements can lose their breath, disperse and all but disappear. It is also important to remember how at times of visibility movements have often

depended on representatives within the political system, either from 'movement' parties or supporters in traditional parties. For instance, the Dutch and German peace movements – the strength of both of which had a decisive impact on NATO – were significantly aided by the parliamentary work and voices of the Greens, the Dutch Left and left **MPs** in the social democratic parties of both countries.

The problem of political visibility

Why should representation matter? After all, the strength and persistence of the peace movement in the 1980s shows that some modern social movements have many of the advantages of political organisation that one associates with a party: continuity, memory, cumulative understanding and resources, sustained visibility. The quick-footedness, self-confidence and political maturity of the 1980s peace movement, for instance, owes something to the lasting roots which earlier movements, of feminists, students, anti-nuclear, radical trade union activists had put down. Significant groupings of people who became politically active in the 60s and 70s and who in earlier generations would have been the cadre of Communist or Social Democratic Parties instead devoted their political energies to long term if sporadic independent organising, educating and agitating. Even their personal networks provided a kind of framework for passing on traditions.

A major contribution to this continuity was provided by the infrastructure and communication network of CND. Although CND was only one part of this very widely based movement, its longevity across generations of the radical left and its political visibility make a revealing study in any discussion of the problems of visibility and sustainability facing any notion of an organisation to the left of the Labour Party.

CND was founded in the late 50s in response to the agreement of the then Conservative government to allow US nuclear missiles (the Thor missile) to be sited around the country. It is still going strong with 50,000 members in 1995. Periodically it has brought together the predominantly middle class non-conformist British left, regardless of party. In doing so it has acted as a form of political displacement for a limited but significant section of the British left, a political home for many of the disaffected. It has much of the **infrastructure** of a party – hundreds of branches; a centre which briefs and informs the members; an annual conference; frequently high profile leaders and something of a common culture. It has even managed to gain political representation and the visibility that flows from it, by making sure that **MPs** who supported it were very closely identified with the cause, Michael Foot in his early political days being the classic example. At the same time as unintentionally and informally serving a wider political function for the disaffected left, it very strictly limited its

formal concerns to nuclear disarmament. This is probably a factor in its longevity and its high visibility. Different parts of the left came together because they agreed on one central issue: banning the bomb. The intense ideological debates took place in the pub and on the demonstrations. Also, under Britain's present political system it is probably only by being, or presenting itself, as a single issue campaign that a movement can gain sustained political representation and hence visibility.

In these ways CND is the exception that proves the rule that without parliamentary representation a social movement can easily become invisible. Normally a left movement that has broad political goals has no direct access to the political system. Not only does it therefore lack political visibility but it tends to become abstract and overly propagandistic in its appeal. Political representation acts as a focus and a pressure on an organisation to translate its aspirations into specific proposals about the exercise of power. Moreover the experience of trying (whether through the New Left Clubs of the 1950s or the Socialist Society in the 1980s and the Socialist Movement in the 1990s) shows the difficulties of establishing lasting local, regional structures amongst the independent activists of the radical left in Britain, where such structures cannot feed into a political organisation with a national public presence able to reach out and gain popular support.

Organisation on a purely extra-parliamentary basis is extremely difficult to sustain. Given the fact that the media reflect the parliamentary and **majoritarian** definition of politics in Britain, an extra-parliamentary left, even with a few sympathetic Labour **MPs**, is in effect organising in the dark. It takes a great effort of will to keep up one's own forms of communication when the movement gains little validation from the wider society. An example would be the fate of the left that came together during the **1984–85** miners strike and later led to the creation of the Socialist Movement. During the strike there was a tremendously active and creative coalition involving, especially at local level, just about every social and trade union movement and almost all the organisations of the left. Efforts were made to build something from this: for example a Socialist Conference attended by nearly 2,000 people was held in Chesterfield in 1986 attracting significant national publicity. These conferences have continued, and a movement has been partially institutionalised, even to the extent of launching an independent magazine for the wider left, **Red Pepper**. Moreover, in most towns and cities there is an active radical left that comes together across party and organisational boundaries around major issues of the day. It is tempting to think of this network of disparate activists as a party in waiting; in reality it is a coalition of the disenfranchised with as yet no very clear definition of its future. Moreover, involvement in these and other somewhat precarious projects of the radical

left is far far smaller than on the continent where it has its own political presence. In sum, the marginal fate of the radical left in Britain is a telling witness to the limits of extra-parliamentary movements in parliamentary democracies.

In recent years, however, both the internal and external challenges to the existing British state have increased the possibilities of direct political representation for the radical left.

Already in Scotland the level of political debate and negotiation provides something of an inspiration and encouragement to democrats and pluralist socialists south of the border. All parties bar the Tories have highly developed proposals for a Scottish Parliament involving proportional representation and positive discrimination to remedy the disadvantages facing women. The Labour Party in Scotland, reluctantly and still with a few laggards, has had to accept that it cannot rule the roost of the left. A left exists independently and in electoral competition with Labour. Such a left is in part represented by the Scottish National Party (SNP), a party whose present leadership and the majority of its membership are well to the left of Labour, though it is first and foremost a nationalist party. Scottish Militant, a small but very active party formed, as its name implies, by Scottish members of the Trotskyist, 'entrism' group Militant when they were expelled from the party, has also built a small electoral base through the leading role it played in the campaign against the poll tax and on other problems facing working class communities in Scotland.

Developments in Ireland also shake the status quo of Britain's unwritten codes of oligarchic rule. Although there is unlikely to be any lasting democratic settlement until after the next general election, debate and negotiations are driving towards a written constitution. The associated constitutional issues of bills of rights, electoral systems, degrees of **decentralisation** and the ending of the hold of Westminster are all becoming central to public debate. The cultural and information flows between Eire, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales make it impossible to inoculate the English mainland against the democracy bug, especially, when the mainland carries independent campaigns like Charter 88, Liberty and the Electoral Reform Society or politically allied groups like the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform.

The pressure for electoral reform is strongly reinforced from Europe. Membership of the European Union requires Britain to introduce a proportional electoral system for the European elections by 1996. Constitutional conservatives in both major parties will have great difficulty preventing such a reform from attracting public interest and spreading to the elections for Westminster, especially with the all-party - bar the Tory minority - agreement for a proportional system in the Scottish Parliament, to whose

creation the Labour leadership is committed. The extent of public disaffection with existing political parties, and the general sense of not being represented – both well-documented in opinion polls – is also likely to lead to a spread of interest in a more proportional electoral system once people have had a taste of the extended choices for which it can allow.

A further institutional pressure stemming from Europe is (paradoxically, given the concern over the democratic deficit in Brussels) the way that it provides an alternative source of resources and political platform to Westminster. It thus strengthens decentralising pressures against party leaderships seeking to tighten central control and helps to pluralise British politics. An example of the former is the way that radical employment, social or ecological projects in many British cities – previously funded by left wing local authorities – have been able to get money from the European Commission which is not available from the government. This experience has helped to nurture the seeds of regional consciousness and militancy in different regions of the UK as well as fuelling national consciousness in Scotland and Wales."

Another pluralising mechanism can be seen in the way that the emergence of the European Parliament as an increasingly serious political platform upsets the ultimately centralised character of the Labour Party (the power of the parliamentary leadership through its extensive capacities for patronage). Members of the Labour Group of the European Parliament, which increasingly offers a career structure of its own, are not beholden in any way to the Westminster leadership. Neither does Walworth Road, the Labour Party's HQ, have anything like as much influence over the choice of candidates for European constituencies. They have the independence to develop their own line. A recent example was when nearly half of the Labour MEPs publicly challenged Tony Blair's attempts to eliminate a commitment to common ownership from the Party's constitution. Several of them, most notably Ken Coates, went on to argue the relevance of common ownership for a European economy. Such a rebellion would be unthinkable among MPs. It gave a considerable fillip of confidence to activists in the constituencies and unions who wanted to challenge the direction of the new leadership.

Another source of the political and intellectual confidence of the left MEPs is the fact they have allies to their left in votes and campaigns in the European Parliament. The experience of working with the new left parties on the continent has begun to break down the fear of such parties that has long been a feature of the political monoculture of the British labour movement – in which any talk of **left alternatives** to Labour is viewed as a betrayal. It has even enabled left Labour MEPs to **observe** that the existence of an electoral and extra-parliamentary competitor to the left of social democracy usually strengthens the hand of the left inside these

social democratic parties and more generally adds to critical and left influences on the whole political culture. Such thoughts have historically been inimical to Labour Party thinking. Labourism involved a political logic which transfers, inappropriately and indiscriminately, the imperatives of industrial unity – 'one out all out'; the importance of unity for the effectiveness of strike action – to politics, a sphere where a more pluralist ethos would be more appropriate to the lively political culture of the left. Here Tony Blair's leadership – despite his claim to modernise – deploys this anti-pluralist ethic of old Labour as a bulwark to the leadership's power. In this organisational sense he is just the latest chip off old Labour's block.

How might the break up of Labour's monoculture develop and allow democratic expression of the views and activities of the radical left?

Labour's options and the end of the left's *illusions*

The former Cambridge economist and adviser to Labour in the 1960s, Nicholas Kaldor, once remarked that if post-war regulations over the movement and conduct of finance were lifted there would never again be a Labour government. What he did not anticipate was Labour learning to live with financial deregulation and operating monetarist policies along with some mild social reforms. The Spanish and French Socialist Parties responded to the mobility of capital in this way, and Tony Blair's Labour Party shows every indication of governing in the same way.

Its rhetoric proclaims a passionate and no doubt sincere concern with social justice and the righting of sixteen years of Tory wrongs. Labour's new leadership is determined, however, not to make specific policy commitments beyond those that have been proved by the opinion polls to be uncontroversial. This is not inertia or unconscious cowardice but electoral strategy. It hopes to glide into office on fair winds released by the collapse of the Major government, steering according to the lights of middle England. Any specific commitment of which the public is yet to be convinced is a hostage to fortune, an electoral gaffe. At times this can make Labour spokespeople appear evasive and totally unconvincing. If it were not for the extent of the failure, the corruption and the divided state of the government, one would seriously doubt the tactical wisdom – not to mention deeper strategic disagreements – of this approach.

My purpose here, however, is not to second-guess Labour's electoral advisers but to explore the likely dynamic of Labour politics in the event of a Labour government – either a Labour majority or a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. To consider likely developments in depth we need to ask a question to which many loyal but independent minded activists have assumed, as they gave support to Tony Blair, that there is a positive answer. Is there any possibility that the softly, softly, no commitments tactics are simply that: tactics to get into government? Once in government will Tony

Blair implement a programme of radical reform on which his research team has been working discreetly in the meantime?

Certainly there is no lack of alternative policies which are quite compatible with the modernisation of Labour. The most coherent are provided by Will **Hutton**, *The Guardian's* Economics Editor in his latest book *The State We're In*²⁸. This is in effect a manifesto for modernising British capitalism. **Hutton** argues that the economic weakness of British capitalism lies in its financial system with its high profit targets and its short-term horizons. He also argues that this has been sustained by and has symbiotically reinforced Britain's unmodernised, undemocratic political system. He argues for a radical, republican overhaul of the City and industry which would involve a **regionalised** Bank of England, a German model of workers rights vis à vis management and regulatory measures to ensure the greater availability of finance for long term and socially useful investment. He also argues for a thoroughgoing democratisation of every state institution aimed at the sharing of sovereignty between local, regional, national and continental levels of government and civic associations, and at the dethroning of the executive and particularly the Treasury. He further urges that Britain should play a leading role in establishing stable democratic international economic institutions. It is not socialism, but, if it were to be implemented by Labour, it would be very widely supported within the party.

The problem, however, for a party that has gained office by stealth as Labour seems intent on doing, is that it will not have built a public awareness, the groundswell of popular pressure that would put the City and similar entrenched interests on the defensive. Putting Will **Hutton** in the Cabinet or employing him as an adviser would not be a solution. For the problem is not simply of devising the reforms but, given their challenging character, the current condition is winning public understanding and confidence in the reforms. This requires a pre-election campaign of persuasion and consciousness—raising which at the time of writing Tony Blair seems to be avoiding like the plague.

In the absence of a strong public campaign on these kind of reforming economic and social policies, a majority or even more so, a minority Labour government is likely to come into serious conflict with many of its own supporters in the trade unions, in parliament and amongst the public more generally – people will expect that a Labour government will mean the end of the absolute **rule** of the market and a noticeable improvement in the lives of millions of people. These are the kinds of circumstances in which Left Labour **MPs** are likely to vote against the party whip and ally themselves with extra-parliamentary campaigns rather than fall in behind government action.

In fact, in the event of a minority Labour government, a well organised,

politically coherent band of Left **MPs** could have as much bargaining power as the Liberal Democrats. The Socialist Campaign Group of **MPs** (the most organised group of left **MPs**) has not been notable for its coherence in the past five years or so. But recent new recruits from the 1993 election appear to be joining with others to make it a more effective body. However, the variables involved in the event of some kind of Labour government make it too complex to predict the form that divisions in the party, and most significantly the unions, might take.

But several points can be made with certainty which return us to some of the reasons behind Ralph's conclusion that by 1976 the left had not moved on. First, most radical socialist members of the Labour Party, including **MPs**, have few if any illusions about turning it into a socialist party, whether with one, two or three more heaves. That does not mean they will walk away from it in disgust when a Labour government fails to introduce radical economic reform – though some certainly will. They feel the party or at least parts of it are as much, if not more, 'their party' as the leadership's – and they will fight for their right to remain in the party on their own terms. The constitutional reforms in the late 1970s and early **1980s**, especially mandatory reselection of **MPs**, has had the effect of strengthening the bond between effective and conscientious **MPs** and their constituency party. Most of the Campaign Group **MPs** fit into that category. Before any rebellious stand they will work to bring significant sections of the party with them. But they too are under no illusions about where power in the party lies.

The late Richard Crossman, left of centre member of Labour Cabinets in the **1960s**, political diarist and political theorist, once made a classic comparison between the 'dignified' elements of Britain's unwritten constitution disguising the realities of power and a similar mystification in the structure of the Labour Party. 'In order to maintain the enthusiasm of party militants to do the organising work for which the Conservative Party pays a vast army of workers,' argues Crossman, 'a constitution was needed which apparently created a full party democracy while excluding (these militants) from power'. With the constitutional reforms of the late 70s and early 80s 'these militants', with support from thousands of trade unionists, threatened to intrude into the party's centres of power. Some accommodated to this power; others have been rudely pushed back. But many of them have seen through the constitution's dignified appearance and become fully aware of their position. They know that they may have a power base in the party but that this is not realistically a spring board for the centres of party power. More likely it is a way outwards and sideways to the left and movements outside the party and a platform to communicate to the wider public. This is how they use it.

The other notable way in which the left in the Labour Party have moved

on from the state of affairs that Ralph described in 1976 is that they no longer conduct themselves as subordinates. In terms of the power structure of the party they are under no illusion that they are in a subordinate position, but they have no hesitation in drawing on other sources of power to win political victories independently of Labour's front bench. Tony Benn sets the example. He constantly runs his own campaign on matters of government abuses of power regardless of the Party leadership. On the basis of considerable popularity, reluctant respect and interest from the media he sometimes wins and almost always strikes a noticeably insubordinate note of opposition. Other **MPs**, Jeremy Corbyn and Chris **Mullin** for instance, are associated with impressive victories in the Courts over the appalling miscarriages of justice and helped free the wrongfully convicted Birmingham Six and Guildford Four, where the powerful opposition came from a persistent extra-parliamentary campaign.

These features of the radical Labour Left also reveal something about the left outside Westminster and frequently outside the Labour Party: that diffuse though it is, it has the potential to provide a power base of its own. Whether on the issue of cruise missiles in the **80s**, the Gulf War in the **90s**; over the poll tax, education, hospital closures, the rights of the disabled, or the Criminal Justice Act, movements have been organised independently of the Labour Party – or of any party. Most of the activists who come together in these movements and regularly participate in local networks of the left are in no hurry to join or form a party. Whether Labourist or Leninist, parties do not have a good record as far as most of the left in Britain is concerned. But this does not mean these activists limit themselves to 'single issue' politics. Amongst many of them there is a strong desire to make connections across issues and localities and to define a shared vision based on common wealth, common land, equality, justice, sustainability and do-it-yourself politics.

A minority of left activists have joined the Green Party. And in recent years, following a split with the more parliamentarist – moderate – group of well known personalities, this party is open to close collaboration with others on the radical left, inviting left Labour **MPs** and independent socialists to speak at their conference and collaborate in their campaigns. A smaller minority has joined the Socialist Workers Party, which though energetic and persistent has not, for all its longevity, managed seriously to grow or extend its impact beyond the campuses and occasional workplaces and union branches. It includes many serious and effective socialists, and it is likely to grow as individuals leave a Labour Party whose leadership intends to drop the party's founding **socialist** commitment. But as an **organisation** it has not really moved on from the isolated and often sectarian position Ralph describes in his 1976 survey.

In sum then, and trying with difficulty to be as cool in my assessment

as Ralph was in his, I would argue that there has been progress in the last twenty years towards 'an effective political formation' of the radical left. But it has been uneven and incomplete. It cannot be measured by membership cards, numbers of branches, election victories or the size of the 'troops' on the ground. The progress has been in the growth of a self-confident left without illusions about Labour (inside as well as outside the Labour Party) and able to reach out to and ally with movements independent of Labour; in the methodological foundations for a political organisation that is rooted in the daily life and struggles of working people but has representatives in the political system; in creating coalitions of like-minded radical leftists across formal party divides. It is too early to tell how these changes will combine with others to produce the political agency we need. After all, it has been done successfully elsewhere in Western Europe. The British left, more particularly the English left, tends to be a little slow. But with the British state, the symbol and part cause of our inertia, under pressure from all sides, and with the chance to add to that pressure ourselves if and when Labour is in office, we might catch up. Perhaps too, if we are attentive to the experiences and lessons of others, we can gain from being late.

NOTES

1. See Ralph Miliband, 'Moving On', *Socialist Register* 1976, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville. Merlin Press, London p. 128.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.* pp. 133 & 134.
4. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, Michael Joseph, London 1994.
5. For myself this is a process which began by attending the Conferences of the Institute for Workers Control in the late 60s and early 70s, usually in Birmingham, Nottingham or Sheffield. These brought together from all over the country local left wing working class leaders of an independent turn of mind, those intellectuals from the 'old' new left engaged with grass roots politics, and activists from the new student movement and even the emerging women's movement. Then in 1981 came the 2,000 strong conference following the publication of *Beyond the Fragments* which I co-authored with Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal. Following this, in 1982, came the foundation of the Socialist Society committed to socialist education, research and propaganda of a radical kind, independent of party. In 1986, in the aftermath of the miners strike, when there was the strong pressure for a left movement that was not tied to the increasingly hostile inner life of the Labour Party but on the other hand did not involve withdrawal from the party, the Society jointly with the Campaign Group of Labour MPs to organise a Socialist Conference in Chesterfield. This became an annual event and led to the formation of the Socialist Movement, which in 1994 helped to launch *Red Pepper* as an independent magazine for the radical left.
6. For example the New Left Clubs in the late 1950s and early 1960s associated with the *Universities and Left Review*. Then in-1967, the Convention of the Left organised by Raymond Williams.
7. Ralph Miliband, *Socialism For A Sceptical Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994.
8. *Ibid.* p. 148.
9. R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, Merlin Press London 1972

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

10. *Socialism For A Sceptical Age*, p. 148.
11. For the history of the Workers Party see M. Keck, *Workers Party and Democracy in Brazil*, London 1991.
12. *Socialism For a Sceptical Age*, p. 184.
13. Critical theory, especially the work of Marcuse, was especially influential with the student movements of Germany, Britain and the US in the late 60s. Critical theory's focus on themes such as bureaucracy, authoritarianism, information technology and sexual repression resonated with the movement's own interests. In the 1980s post-modernism, with its focus on the symbolic, was a strong influence on many people associated with for example, feminism and sexual liberation, many of whose activities were also concerned with the symbolic, as well as the material. However, the denial by many post-modern theorists of any reality beyond discourse, could not resonate with those social movements activists whose collective effort was aimed at transforming power structures that existed independently of themselves. Here critical realism, a philosophical development influenced by the movements as well seeking to act as an 'underlabourer' for their politics, is closer to the movements methods. It can sustain philosophically the presumption of most social movement activists of a real world independent of their knowledge of it – the object of their efforts of transformation. But in contrast to many forms of positivism and crude determinism, it does not reduce this reality to one structure or one level of reality. For useful commentaries on these different traditions see W. Outhwaite *New Philosophies of Science*, London, 1987 and Jurgen Habermas, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994; D. Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity* Blackwells, Oxford 1990 and R. Braidotti *Patterns of Dissonance*; A. Sayer *An Introduction to Critical realism* Verso, London 1994 and R. Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London 1991.
14. In *Arguments for a New Left; Answering the Free Market* I do assess central contributions to these debates from the point of view of strategies for democratic social change.
15. Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, Dover Publications, New York 1959.
16. For the full story see Chapter 8 of my *Arguments For A New Left*, Blackwells, Oxford. 1994. And also for the views of many of the leading participants, East and West see M. Kaldor ed. *Europe From Below* Verso. London 1991.
17. Looking ahead to the days when such regional and city autonomy exists in Britain: strong city and regional layers of government provide favourable conditions for parties of the new left – on the continent it is at these levels that new left parties are strongest. Another lesson from these continental experiences is that it is at this level that the partnership between political representatives of the left and democratic civic activity has strongest day-to-day reality. Also, it seems that at a local level voters are more prepared to experiment with choosing a party to the left of the mainstream.
18. Will Hutton, *The State We're In*, Jonathan Cape, London 1995.
19. Richard Crossman in his Introduction to Bagehot's *The English Constitution*, Fontana 1963.