
The starting point of Sebastian Berg’s highly informative study of the British and American intellectual left in the wake of 1989 is a glaring paradox: When the self-declared socialist states of the Eastern bloc disintegrated one after the other in the years between 1989 and 1991, left-wing intellectuals in the West felt compelled to rethink their position despite the fact that they never accepted the USSR and its satellite states as rightful incarnations of socialism—let alone communism—in the first place. In fact, both Western Marxists (a term coined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and popularized by Perry Anderson) and post-Marxist advocates of democratic socialism fundamentally rejected real-existing socialism and the Stalinist ideology of Marxism-Leninism as reactionary products of a vulgar-materialist and deterministic “Weltanschauungsmar-xismus” (Heinrich) in the service of state capitalism and autocratic rule. In the United States, this was perhaps most explicitly stated by the likes of Frederic Jameson, Michael Denning, and David Harvey as well as Michael Löwy and István Mészáros—which should serve as a reminder that the intellectual left is a radically international formation—who argued in the pages of *Monthly Re-view* that real-existing socialism was “non-capitalist” at best and that the Soviet Union was still “dominated by capital” (Berg 119). And yet radical thinkers “asked themselves in how far the events of 1989 marked a caesura that required a rethinking of key components of the critical social theory and political analysis they had produced” (16-17).

Berg’s important study aims to cast a closer look at the Anglo-American intellectual left’s reaction to the demise of real-existing socialism in the five years from January 1990 to December 1994. Carefully historicizing and contextualizing the left’s theoretical re-orientation during a period of fundamental crisis, the study proceeds by comparatively analyzing four leading radical journals from Great Britain and the United States: *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* (UK) as well as *Dissent* and *Monthly Review* (U.S.). The book guides its readers with great clarity and intellectual rigor through three main chapters devoted to “Analysing the Impact of 1989 on the British and the American In-telectual Left” (chapter II), chronicling “Crisis and Re-Orientation: Evidence from the Journals” (chapter III), and situating the British and American left’s intellectual and discursive formation “Between Radical Critique and Moderate Recommendations” (chapter IV). It also traces the formative theoretical debates within the field and illuminates productive intellectual clashes—both between theoretical luminaries (E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Robin Blackburn, Norman Geras, etc.) and sometimes incommensurable theoretical paradigms such as Marxist humanism, structuralist Marxism, and post-Marxist discourse theory.

The introduction already reveals an impressive knowledge of the principal journals within the British and North American left, their editorial development and their personnel as well as earlier moments of crisis and re-orientation (1968 and the New Left, Thatcherism and Reagonomics, etc.). The choice of the journals under examination is convincingly argued and positioned in view of a whole other range of publications from the field. The various editors and contributors who produced (and ‘framed the debate’ through and within) these journals are carefully introduced with concise intellectual biographies that highlight common ancestries, theoretical disagreements, scholarly networks, and non-
academic activities. Beyond its immediate concerns with the Anglo-American intellectual left in the wake of 1989, the study thus provides a compelling history of socialist, Marxist and post-Marxist thought and critical theory in twentieth-century Britain and the United States since at least 1956, while at the same time providing a history of its liberal and neoliberal counterpart. As such, the book provides an important resource for future studies of the Anglo-American left in the second half of the twentieth century and will benefit historians and other scholars of the Cold War, of the New Left, and of (neo-)liberal hegemony.

The main part of Berg's study critically surveys the development of often heavily contested theoretical and political positions on a number of core questions that arose in the wake of 1989: What were the specific pitfalls of real-existing socialism that lead to its demise? What is the role of the capitalist and socialist state respectively? Should Marx and Marxist thought still lead the way? What is the role of counter-hegemonic struggles and the means and politics of cultural representation? Can we still discern, or even imagine, “a real movement that abolishes the present state of things,” as Marx and Engels put it? Berg's final verdict on these arguments is somewhat disillusioning, but nonetheless a testimony to the richness and liveliness of such discussions, as he detects “a near-universal agreement among radical intellectuals that a great deal of new thinking was necessary though there was a high degree of disagreement as to what direction it should take” (19). Only in the short outlook at the end of the book do we get a glimpse as to which new common directions could lead the way: radical democracy, anti-globalization struggles, progressive identity politics, and environmental activism. While New Social Movements fortunately were no longer decried as bourgeois or reformist by socialist intellectuals, the British and American intellectual left unfortunately also turned increasingly academic and even 'Fukuyamaist' in the 1990s (desiring a 'capitalism with a human face'). Berg largely refrains from criticizing this development explicitly. Rather, he thoroughly contextualizes this re-orientation, thus revealing its historically contingent material and discursive conditions during a world-historical “conjunctural” crisis (in Gramsci’s sense).

Berg’s methodologically sound analytic focus on “conjunctural” rather than “organic” (structural) crisis, i.e., of capital, which seems obvious in the face of the world-historical events of 1989-1991, means that he writes as a historian of the socialist left rather than a Marxist. The study is strictly academic both in a good way and in the sense of deliberately abstaining from what Marx called “Kritik im Handgemenge” in his Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. The latter was practiced emphatically by many of the Marxist contributors to the journals, some of whom ruthlessly critiqued the becoming hegemonic of post-Marxism in the field of theory and Third Way social democracy in the realm of politics as the only remaining alternatives to liberal hegemony and capitalist barbarism. This uncompromising communist tendency is perhaps best illustrated by a quote from Ellen Meiksins Wood, writing in the Socialist Register’s 1990 volume on The Retreat of the Intellectuals:

We live in curious times. Just when intellectuals of the Left in the West have a rare opportunity to do something useful, if not actually world-historic, they—or large sections of them—are in full retreat. Just when reformers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are looking to Western capitalism for paradigms of economic and political success, many of us appear to be abdicating the traditional role of the Western left as critic of capitalism. Just when more than ever we need a Karl Marx to reveal
the inner workings of the capitalist system, or a Friedrich Engels to expose its ugly realities 'on the ground,' what we are getting is an army of 'post-Marxists' one of whose principal functions is apparently to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism. The 'post-modern' world, we are told, is a pastiche of fragments and 'difference.' The systemic unity of capitalism, its 'objective structures' and totalizing imperatives, have given way (if they ever existed) to a bricolage of multiple social realities, a pluralistic structure so diverse and flexible that it can be rearranged by discursive construction. (Wood 60)

Again in terms of methodology, Berg reads a large sample of articles from all four journals “with questions in mind that are in many cases different from the questions the writers addressed [as] it uses a method that could be called 'deconstructive’” (17). Yet the study, for the most part, asks questions that the various contributors to the journals do indeed answer in a number of (often conflicting) ways. Such procedural framework thus makes it difficult to address issues that are absent from the discourse entirely in order to inquire the reasons for and the consequences of such absences. For instance, why do most of Berg’s authors refrain from discussing the capitalist value-form and its critique (Marx, Postone, Harvey, etc.), contemporary reconceptualizations of ideology and fetishism (Castoriadis, Derrida, Žižek, etc.), and decidedly materialist theories of racialization, gender, and sexuality (Hall, Massey, Rubin, etc.)? Berg is well aware, however, of the significance—both politically and theoretically—of anti-colonial struggles for the development of postcolonial Marxist positions (e.g., C. L. R. James and Amil Cabrar) too often sidelined in these journals (see 189). He consequently details important theoretical contributions on combined and uneven development, class recomposition and anti-capitalist strategy of habitually neglected Marxist thinkers outside the academic canon such as Samir Amin and James Boggs (289).

Nevertheless, a more sustained look at positions that were developing outside the narrowly Anglo-American sphere could have been helpful here. While the study does trace the debates about questions of agency and strategy within all four journals (see 263-308), a critical comparison with (Italian) postoperaismo or (French) communization theory, for instance, could have shed some light on the limits of a particularly Anglo-American radical imagination. However, as Christian Huck writes in his review of Berg’s Intellectual Radicalism after 1989 for the recent issue of Anglistik, “such are the short-comings of every study that sticks to its guns as meticulously as this one; the unquestionable richness of detail and precision necessarily has to come at the cost of leaving some wider questions unanswered. Putting these minor criticisms aside, this study can only be recommended to every reader [...]. For a seasoned reader, the story of how intellectual radicals in Britain and the USA struggled to come to terms with the ‘wind of change’ in 1989 will surely find manifold echoes in one’s own intellectual biography” (163).

Berg’s comprehensive archival study of Anglo-American intellectual radicalism in the wake of 1989 provides us with an extremely well-informed and nuanced account of theoretical and political re-orientation that will certainly serve as a powerful resource and starting point for various future studies of re-orientation and crisis in the broadest sense. One may hope for a scholar with Berg’s erudition and breadth of knowledge to extend and update the study of these four longstanding journals into the present conjuncture, or otherwise take up the baton and run with it. Among the numerous new and influential radical journals
(and magazines) of the Anglophone left that have emerged in the last decade or two—both online and offline—such as Jacobin, Catalyst, Viewpoint, n+1 or Salvage, the Endnotes collective, which formed in the United States and the United Kingdom in 2005 and publishes an eponymous journal, most clearly signals an important shift and renewed re-orientation in the face of an unresolved crisis of accumulation, a growing global surplus population, neoliberal austerity, rising debt, state repression, and authoritarianism in the capitalist heartlands. Endnotes emerged from narrow Marxist debates, often drawing on the critique of political economy, historical materialism, debates in the French ultra-left, and American Critical Race Theory, but the journal supplemented critical theory with exhaustive analysis of social movements in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. The editorial collective explicitly describes itself as “communist” and desires the abolition of capitalism, which in our current age of riots and occupations opens onto questions of class composition, superfluity, gender, and racialization, which Endnotes takes up in a decidedly materialist way, where communism is once again “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” (Karl Marx).

Works Cited


Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich (Kiel)