# IV. Between Radical Critique and Moderate Recommendations?

This study has shown how the radical, Marxist-inspired intellectual left in Britain and the United States made sense of the collapse of the state-socialist systems of the Eastern Bloc. In a comprehensive contrastive comparison, the analogies, similarities and differences found in the journals as well as the specificities of the British and the U.S. reactions have been identified. The task of this final part of the study is to move one step further analytically. The first chapter deals with the question of whether the re-orientations with which socialist intellectuals concerned themselves after 1989/91 must be understood as self-adaptations to social democratic and post-Marxist positions, even if as perhaps reluctant ones.

The second chapter of this part offers a short tentative discussion of the problem as to whether the reactions analysed are divisively British or American, or whether they reveal the existence of a discursive community of the Anglo-American intellectual left. To a certain extent, reflections on this question must remain tentative as a definite answer would require cross-checking with further analyses based on different corpora of sources and using a variety of methodological designs. Finally, the last chapter completes this study with a short outlook on developments in the journals since the mid-1990s and on the state of the intellectual left in the early twenty-first century.

# 1. BETWEEN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND POST-MARXISM?

## 1.1. Democratic Socialism and Social Democracy

It is obvious that socialist intellectuals under the impact of the events of 1989/91 discussed varieties and developed models of democratic socialism which brought them close to central tenets of social democracy. A case in point was their acceptance of gradualism and reformism as the only possible roads towards 'more socialist' social and economic relations. This reorientation was accompanied by an acceptance of the norms and institutions of parliamentary democracy. They left behind the idea of revolution as a violent rupture or as abrupt comprehensive change affecting all dimensions of public life, but also the role of intellectuals as a revolutionary group; one which would follow a vanguardist strategy and lead society towards socialism. Ellen Meiksins Wood identified this idea of intellectual vanguardism or substitutionism as an important characteristic of the 'Second New Left', which became the core group in *New Left Review* from 1963 onwards. However, the same strategy was adopted by large sections of the 1968 and post-1968 New Left as well (cf. 1995: 33). In particular, it is the 'emotional' reactions in all the journals – in which writers deplore the loss of a generational project – which illustrate that this vanguardist self-image had run its cause. After accepting the inevitability of gradualism, socialist intellectuals tried to retain some distinction from social democracy by insisting on the transformative dimensions of their reformism. However, the distinction remained unconvincing because the boundary between merely reformist reforms of capitalism and transformative reform strategies was difficult to discern. Obviously the intellectuals assumed that transformative reforms, such as wage earners funds, would incrementally destabilise capitalism through changes in property relations, but no strategies existed for how to safeguard transformative reforms as long as they were in their early stages and hence could be easily overturned.

Socialist strategy, according to socialist intellectuals, still included the class struggle. However, this struggle was reduced to a working-class politics – to policies that considered and pursued the interests of working-class people via parliamentary work and were supported, backed-up, reinforced and radicalised by the extra-parliamentary activity of labour organisations.

It is true that socialist intellectuals demanded the extension of the principles of liberal-parliamentary democracy to all areas of public life. The problem was less that this constituted a gradualist, reformist approach than that they did not provide clear answers to the question of how to achieve this within the entrenched and self-protective power structures of capitalist democracies which they so lucidly analysed.

Several times intellectuals called for the preservation of the achievements of social democracy and reformist labour movements. The welfare states in particular were declared to be worth of protection. Practically, this amounted to a defence of Keynesian corporatism and of the link between economic growth – or increased efficiency – and 'functional socialism'. In this context, most intellectuals agreed on the importance of centre-left working-class parties. This sympathy for material working-class interests along the lines of the old labourist slogan 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work', the declarations of empathy for social democratic parties and the emphasis on democratic rights and liberal principles again constitute examples of increasingly blurred boundaries between democratic socialism and social democracy: like the latter, the former had become a hybrid of liberalism and socialism. Fittingly, many intellectuals were now prepared to grant markets and even the profit principle a positive status and to accept relative equality or – to use Eric Olin Wright's phrase once more – 'less classness' as the goal of socialist policies. The retrieval and rehabilitation of thinkers such as Kautsky and Bernstein also testify to this reorientation. Similarly, the continuing insistence on the centrality of the national state as an arena of political struggle revealed an acceptance of existing institutions – even if it was slightly ironic that internationalists embraced the national state at a time when liberals and conservatives started speaking of the inevitability of globalisation and the consequences of declining state power. For the intellectuals, however, a strong state – all previous qualifications on the roles states play in the reproduction of capitalism formulated by Marxist-inspired state theory notwithstanding – remained an indispensable tool for redistribution. While this had been a position of left intellectuals long before 1989, many now followed the majorities in most social democratic parties of the time which changed their position on economic protectionism and backed the European unification project.

For most socialist intellectuals, a rhetorical and analytical commitment to socialism and Marxism remained. However, the study has presented

numerous statements in which the intellectuals defined their socialist orientation as a point of reference or as a horizon rather than as a guide to political action. This abstract commitment often found expression in a critical perspective on the very welfare societies which should be defended and in a critique of the West's – and especially the United States' – geo-political strategies directed against the former Eastern Bloc as well as the global South. Furthermore, intellectuals claimed to have no illusions about the limits of parliamentarism. Despite these qualifications, they remained largely silent on those burning questions which social democracy had never been able to solve: how to organise redistribution – how to create opportunities for a 'good life' for everyone – without ecologically disastrous levels of economic growth; how to initiate redistribution on a global scale; and how to prepare and safeguard redistribution not just of wealth but also of political influence given the actual existing distribution of power in liberal or capitalist democracies. Altogether, socialist intellectuals became a functional 'keep left' tendency on the fringes of social democracy and liberalism at a time when Social Democracy and Liberalism moved rightward and – as 'New Realists' or 'New Democrats' – embraced many elements of Britain's and the United States' neo-liberal settlements of the 1980s.

### 1.2. Neo-Marxism and Post-Marxism

Despite controversial debates between those who called themselves Marxists or neo-Marxists on the one hand and post-Marxists on the other – debates which had started before 1989 – again a high level of conceptual overlap between both groups can be observed. While several post-Marxists such as Cornelius Castoriadis, André Gorz, Paul Hirst and Chantal Mouffe wrote for some of the journals, many others accepted post-Marxism's claim that the struggle for democracy should be the first order, even if the struggle for socialism played an important role within it. Socialist and post-Marxist intellectuals agreed on the irrelevance of traditional ideas of 'revolution' and emphasised the centrality of struggles over 'hegemony' in society, even if the latter subscribed to a discursive understanding of society and defined hegemony more restrictedly as a discursive concept. Still, both groups underlined that such struggles required the formation of coalitions and remained convinced that considerable degrees of variety and unpredictability would forbid prognoses on future progressive causes. They backed

constitutionalism and emphasised the importance of constitutional change, they agreed on the necessity of accepting democratic principles, and propagated the idea of formal and informal governance at all levels of society and in all areas of public life. This notion of democratic struggles over hegemony tied in with an understanding of historical developments as contingent. Even if some intellectuals upheld the notion of history as the history of class struggles, these interpretations were pluralist and context-specific – as regulation theorists had already demonstrated the specificity of different types of capitalism and of the class struggles taking place within them. As a result, the shape and the outcome of future class struggles was unpredictable and depended on the formation of coalitions for potentially hegemonic projects.

Strategically, the acceptance of contingency required a focus on politics and on the forging of alliances at grassroots level and between existing organisations. The cooperation with and among the new social movements and non-governmental organisations was of central importance. In addition, neo- and post-Marxists called for a designing of concrete utopias with a modest character, taking on board ideas from concepts such as associative democracy, governance through institutions of civil society, and communitarianism. Just like social democracy, these models stressed the extension of democracy to the social and the economic spheres; unlike social democracy, they recommended various forms of de-linking from the capitalist economy.

Additionally and on a more theoretical level, socialist intellectuals appropriated many post-Marxist positions. Marxism had been 'cut to size' – and they applauded the diminution and welcomed the new climate of openness which fostered the search for new visions and sources of inspiration. In this context, normative debates moved centre-stage. Ethical reflections became even more necessary; the adoption of a weak form of historical materialism not only reinforced the principle of contingency but abandoned – or at least qualified – the dialectical principle. Historical openness called for the intention to 'make history' and thus lent legitimacy to vision, fantasy, creative thinking and open debate.

Again, a difference between the socialist intellectuals and post-Marxists lay in the former group's bleaker interpretation of international politics. In the late 1990s and after, this pessimism resulted in discussions on a 'new imperialism'. In terms of other problems, socialist intellectuals were no

more inventive than post-Marxists: when it came to the question of how to realise grassroots self-emancipation within existing power relations, the former group's critiques of post-Marxists' belief that grassroots struggles could be replicated on the global level via existing institutions – from non-governmental organisations to the United Nations – was certainly justified. The same goes for vague ideas of global democratic governance. However, whereas socialist intellectuals criticised these ideas on the one hand, on the other they embraced them through their trust in transnational (for example, European) constitutionalism and the possibility of grassroots-level de-linking. Hence, just as in the case of social democracy, the disagreement between socialist and post-Marxist intellectuals concerned the field of interpretation, of how to perceive the political, social and economic world. These disagreements were concerned much less with which concrete strategies and policies followed from these interpretations.

## 2. BRITISH AND AMERICAN OR ANGLO-AMERICAN RE-ORIENTATIONS?

The summaries which form the final sections of each of the analytical chapters (Part III) have tried to explain the differences between the British and the U.S. re-orientations and debates with specificities of the political cultures in Britain and the United States and of the respective political 'subcultures' to which left intellectuals in both societies belong. All of the political-academic journals analysed here published work from the opposite side (respectively) of the Atlantic, as well as from elsewhere. Furthermore, as many of the contributors had transnational professional careers, their publications necessarily reflect a blend of national and transnational influences. A comparison of sources within such a corpus can only yield tentative results and the following reflections are necessarily and correspondingly cautious. That being said, differences between British and U.S. reactions can, however, be deduced from the detailed analyses.

The re-orientations of the British intellectual left mirror a specific socialist tradition ranging from the socialist humanism of the 'first New Left' to the structural Marxism of the editorial core of *New Left Review*. For all of them, wherever they would position themselves in this field, the Cold-War experience was central. It proved extremely difficult to unsubscribe

from a dichotomous East-West logic even if those intellectuals who had founded the journals deliberately engaged in attempts at finding a 'third' position. In political discourse among the British left, both the Soviet Union and the United States were closely associated with their international roles. The U.S.S.R. was evaluated positively for its contributions to the defeat of Fascism and to anti-colonial independence struggles. The United States was blamed for its imperialist postures and frequent acts of aggression against socialist or progressive states and movements beyond the Eastern Bloc. The fact that the society of the United States itself also constituted an arena of social struggles was certainly not ignored, but these struggles were seen as chanceless and regarded as playing only a minor role for socialist advance or retreat elsewhere. In other words, experiencing the omnipresence of the Cold War from a certain perspective and seeing it through British rather than U.S. eyes, encouraged the adoption of a quasi-Deutscherite position and forwarded the observation of the two 'superpowers' as relatively monolithic entities subjugating the world to their Manichaean logic – although one of the two, the United States, bore more responsibility than the other. Whereas this view was arguably less complex than the perspective presented by writers from within the United States, the British journals seemed to have a more familiar understanding of developments on the European continent. Their publications were more aware of the weaknesses of European Social Democracy as well as of the European unification project and they expressed a more profound pessimism about the social changes and reconfigurations of political power following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

On the one hand, reactions and re-orientations in the American journals seemed to reflect a radical U.S. tradition rather than just a more narrowly defined socialist one. Radicals in the United States had always had a more pluralist perception of popular struggles and put their emphasis less exclusively on the class conflict. On the other hand, the antagonism between former Trotskyist critics and former anti-Trotskyist supporters of the Soviet Union was still visible in the reactions to 1989/91, even if these positions had lost some of the immense relevance they had once had as a line of demarcation in the U.S. left. Considerations in the journals testified to the U.S. left's traditional weakness which made several European features – such as the existence of working-class parties – look very attractive. Additionally, reflections revealed a self-conscious perception among intellectuals that they lived 'at the heart of the beast'; a 'beast' which constituted one

of the most powerful actors in world politics – if not the single most powerful one – but at the same time continued to be one of the most unequal societies in the rich and technologically advanced economies of the West. Hence authors were keenly interested in both social struggles in the United States but also in the country's role in international politics. In regard to the latter, the focus on the European arena of the Cold War was always complemented by observations on developments in other parts of the world, for example, in Latin America and in the Middle East.[1] It seems that writers in the United States also worked under the assumption that they lived in a post-revolutionary society which had developed valuable traditions and practices of participatory democracy, grassroots organisation and communitarianism. Obviously these characteristics had contributed to the dominance of identity politics in discussions of the U.S. left and to the importance of 'constitutional activism' in debates within the left.[2] At the same time, U.S. left intellectuals viewed the centrally-organised and comparatively effective Western European welfare systems with a mixture of admiration and envy and appreciated the strength of their labour movements and progressive parties.

The British and American journals did differ in terms of focus and reflection. However, these tendencies are in turn counterbalanced by a great degree of concurrence between British and U.S. intellectuals. Apart from many shared elements of British and U.S. political cultures and the close personal ties among contributors recruited from a global but even more from an English-speaking community of the intellectual left, some specific unifying elements need to be mentioned. Contributions to the British *Socialist Register* occasionally revealed the publication's proximity to the United States – many of the writers were Americans and wrote from a U.S

1 The point is not that the British journals did not cover these issues – they certainly did. However, coverage of these conflicts and developments had less of an impact on writings about the United States, the Cold War, or the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

2 Constitutional activism, a term originally designed to define a certain approach used by some Supreme Courts when interpreting the U.S. constitution, stands for a perception that it is a continuing task of liberals and radicals in the United States to guarantee that the constitution's basic principles – freedom, equality, the pursuit of happiness – are not denied to any member or group of society.

perspective. *Dissent* evidenced a strong European influence, especially due to its roots in the originally Eastern European Jewish diaspora community in the United States, complemented by refugees from all over Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Finally, the English-speaking community of the intellectual left had its prestigious specialists who wrote on certain issues for more than one journal: the British Ralph Miliband's reflections on democratic socialism and the American Daniel Singer's articles on 'utopistics' could serve as examples. All this makes generalising comparative statements extremely difficult. Clearly, national political cultures and the narrower intellectual-political environments in which the contributors acted played a decisive role for their reactions to the events of 1989/91, but so did the Anglo-American dimension of intellectual-political discourse. Nevertheless, the findings in the analytical chapters suggest that, during the period investigated, the British intellectual left expressed a deeper sense of loss and mourning than the Americans.[3]

3 To say this with more authority would require another study which, on the basis of this one, would ask a representative sample of intellectuals about issues such as their relationships to British and U.S. political cultures, their understanding of Marxism, their interpretation of the Cold War, or their opinions on social democracy and post-Marxism. The study would be especially hindered by the problems that many representatives, particularly of the older generation – such as Howe, Magdoff, Miliband, Saville, Sweezy, or Thompson – have passed away since 1989; apart from a few exceptions, it is too late to ask the older generation. Still, tentatively one can observe generational differences: paradoxically, the younger generation of 1968 libertarian socialists seemed to feel more negatively affected than the older generation, many of whom had become members or sympathisers of Communist Parties in the 1930s and 1940s. An additional problem arises once one tries to draw a line between the two generations. To use the example of *New Left Review*, the first editor, Stuart Hall, is generally counted as a representative of the *first* New Left, whereas Tom Nairn, one of the central figures of the re-organised *New Left Review* as it existed from 1962 onwards as a representative of the *second* New Left – a New Left that was still pre-1968, but widely interpreted as the immediate forerunner of the 1968 movement. Both, however, were born in 1932.

## 3. OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSION

Almost immediately after 1989/91, radical and socialist intellectuals began to fear the consequences of a liberated and radicalised capitalism. This capitalism would not only increase the material and social polarisation in the relatively wealthy societies of Europe and North America; they also expected such a liberated capitalism to be incapable of dealing with existential tasks such as a global redistribution of wealth and the introduction of a mode of production that would end the destruction of the natural environment. These fears turned out to be well justified. The version of capitalism which political economists define as 'neo-liberal regime of accumulation' continued and intensified in Britain and the United States for most of the 1990s and 2000s, and the problems mentioned above were largely ignored. It was only towards the end of the decade of the 2000s that this accumulation regime ran into serious self-created difficulties. Thus the suspicion among left intellectuals that 1989 constituted a turning point in the history of capitalism has been vindicated.

The assumption that 1989/91 marked an ending for socialist intellectuals' self-image as a distinguishable group seems also correct. Intellectuals had to borrow concepts and ideas designed by others and in their self-perceptions this seemed to amount to a loss of distinction. To a certain extent, a two-generational project which united Western Marxism with 1968 libertarianism had come to an end. From now on, the socialist intellectuals in question could only formulate a certain political blend: a social democracy sensible to grassroots activities and struggles, and a post-Marxism aware of power structures, hierarchies and material inequalities in society. Additionally, such a blend could point to unresolved global problems. Still, one could argue, that giving a voice to such a perspective was politically of critical importance. Why for many doing this seemed to be not enough, especially since the re-thinking and modifying of traditional Marxism had started a long time before 1989, is a difficult question. Part of the answer is that the complicated character of Marxism as a system of thought – a hybrid of theory and eschatology – had exploded. Further, following discourse theoretical considerations, one could argue that the legitimacy of Marxist or Marxian-inspired systems of thought or social theories and their abilities to contribute a specific discursive perspective to interpretations of the political world had been put into question. Socialist

intellectuals' materialist version of critical theory became increasingly incompatible with hegemonic discursive frames, which claimed that the events of 1989/91 had deconstructed the whole edifice of socialist theory. Socialist intellectuals were forced to note that the expressive modalities through which they interpreted the collapse – for example, their analyses of the Cold War – were declared illegitimate. The formation of discursive concepts changed: what hitherto seemed logical – for example, that realistic alternatives to capitalism existed – now appeared illogical. Of course, intellectuals could continue to express their perspectives. However, the chance to feed their specialist discourse into a politically relevant 'interdiscourse' had, as they had worried, declined. Radical intellectuals feared that 'capitalism's victory' constituted an epochal break not only in geo-political and political-economic terms, but further, that this break entailed dimensions of a paradigmatic shift in intellectual, political and popular thinking as well – which delegitimised the most important elements of socialist intellectuals' analytical approach. This rupture had dramatic biographical consequences for a generation of intellectuals who by 1989/91 looked back on at least two decades of political and intellectual activity. As a group, they suspected future isolation and anticipated that they would need to reinvent or re-orient themselves. Some did, over a considerable period of time.

All journals continued their work. They commented on, reacted to, and criticised the political developments and problems of the 1990s and 2000s. Some new phenomena promised hope – for example, the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement which the journals arguably had helped to found with their interventions in the globalisation debate and which seemed to re-start radical protest in the West from the mid-1990s onwards. Other phenomena were far from promising, such as the militarisation of international conflicts, heavily criticised by many contributors to the journals. However, this latter phenomenon opened up a new split among the socialist intellectuals because a minority began to defend interventions such as the U.N.-sanctioned war against Iraq in 1991. In this case, it was, surprisingly, Cold-War theorist Fred Halliday who lent his support (cf. Thompson 2007: 152). In later years, especially after 2001, many close to the journal *Dissent* but also some contributors to the other publications, such as Norman Geras, exchanged many of their former convictions and became 'left hawks' or – in analogy to the once leftist 'Cold-War intellectuals' – "War-on-Terror

intellectuals".[1] They extended the notion of forming an intellectual 'rearguard' to a supporting role for the defence of Western democracy and secular enlightenment values against terrorist attacks and 'religious fundamentalism'. The majority, however, continued their critique of geo-politics and for some time engaged in analyses of a 'new imperialism'.

Organisationally, the British journals became increasingly 'Americanised'. Both *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* often published more contributions from U.S. writers than from British or Canadians. To a certain extent, this shift has served to strengthen the trend towards 'aloofness', namely, the distance from political struggles in Britain, for which particularly *New Left Review* is frequently criticised. The American journals seemed to remain closer to developments in U.S. politics. While the British journals had once fulfilled important functions for the movements which emerged as a consequence of the moment and spirit of 1968, they have now become, to use the phrase of *Socialist Register*'s co-editor Colin Leys, "journals in search of a movement".[2]

Soon, another generational change will take place. It remains to be seen whether the journals will retain their characteristics. Currently, many writers – again with the partial exception of *Dissenters* – oscillate between analytical radicalism, accompanied by pessimism, and an embrace of centre-left positions in 'real politics' – a combination which occasionally seems contradictory. Obviously, socialist intellectuals have adopted a homeless left existentialism: they continue to produce analytically sound critiques, but doubt their immediate political effectiveness. This mood of subdued and isolated perseverance has probably been best summarised by Göran Therborn as early as 1993: "Reality is not necessarily as we think. That's why there is a need for empirical research. Society is not what it should be. That's why some of us continue to be on the left." (1993: 191)

1 I owe the term "War-on-Terror intellectuals" to Inderjeet Parmar.

2 This phrase was proposed by Leys in personal conversation.