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## Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

## Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: [review\\_editor@platypus1917.org](mailto:review_editor@platypus1917.org). All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.


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The **Platypus Review**

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# International social democracy

Jack Conrad, Adam Buick, and Robin Halpin

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in the U.S., this politics found its expression in Eugene Dennis, a radical labor leader converted to Marxism in prison by reading the German Marxist, Karl Kautsky. In Germany, in Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht's Communist Party of Germany, inheritor of the Sparta-war league's opposition to joining the German state's most temerously, in the capture of state power by the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin. Thus the Second International gave rise to what is arguably the greatest attempt to change the world in history: the revolutions of 1917-19 in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Italy. In these revolutions, Communists split from Social Democrats, the latter of whom formed the bulwark of counterrevolution. During much of the 20th century, a Marxist-Leninist approach to history prevailed on much of the hard left, according to which the Second International revolutionaries had effectively superseded the politics of more right-wing figures within social democracy, such as Kautsky. The Third International has in this respect been widely accepted as an advance upon the Second. In the 1930s, the rise of fascism seemed to sideline the Communist vs. Social Democrat controversy. A generation later, after World War II, these same social reforms, while still opposing Communism in the East, For a few decades of supposed "convergence" between

### Panel Description

*follows is an edited transcript of their discussion.*

On March 23, 2017, the Playpus Affiliated Society organized a panel discussion, "What Is Socialism? International Social Democracy," at the London School of Economics. Moderated by Nunzia Faes of Playpus, the event brought together the following speakers: Jack Conrad of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Weekly Worker; Adam Buick of the Socialist Party of Great Britain; and Robin Hahip, translator of works by the Exit group. What

tion, might be proven correct. But the New Left in the West emerged in opposition to such reformism, in search of a more radical politics. In the neoliberal era, however, the division between reform and revolution has been blurred if not erased. And today social democracy is on the defensive against neoliberalism, even as its memory is resuscitated by such phenomena as SYRIZA, Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn, and Bernie Sanders. But, do we in fact still need to reckon with the earlier history of Marxism—the split between Communists and Social Democrats—in order to understand the problem and project of social democracy today? How are the questions of social democracy and social revolution related today, in light of history? What has social democracy come to signify politically?

### Opening Remarks

**Back Control:** Let's begin not with socialism but with not Marx preferred to call himself, a communist. I'm not sure when Marx actually came around to communism—maybe it was 1843—but, when he did, he looked at it and said, "it is not scientific enough," and then attempted to put it on a scientific basis. Instead of dreaming about communism and imagining a future where everyone would be wearing x, y, or z as their uniform, it was a materialist communism based on the reality that Marx found himself in,—the 19th century. I did not know the origins of the word "communism." I presume it is Greek. You can read Josephus, a contemporary of Jesus' brother in Palestine, talking about the communists and how they want to free the slaves and create equality, or you can read Plato... Obviously, communism goes far back into history. On the other hand, the term "socialism" was new. It was in the 19th century that the term was coined. Certainly, the notion of social democracy was a product of the 19th century. And, if we look at Marx's followers in Germany, that is what they came to call themselves, social democrats. I think it was Marx who called it "a pig of a name." He did not like the tag social democracy, not because he was opposed to democracy, but because the project of Marxism, the

project of communism, was and is to get rid of the state, and Marx viewed democracy as a form of state. Therefore, as far as Marx was concerned, social democracy was not ambitious enough as an aim.

Nevertheless, what's in a name? We all have problems in terms of these names chiefly due not to the history of the 19th century, but to that of the 20th century. Whether you call yourself a communist, socialist, social democratic, or whatever, we all are carrying a lot of baggage. We all have to spend quite a lot of time answering when people ask, "Well what do you believe in, then?" Lenin once said something like, "We could call ourselves the party of angels and soon the 'angel' would become a bad word."

When Marx talked about socialism, he tended to do so negatively. Yes, he spoke of "working class socialism," but in the *Communist Manifesto* he critiques "conservative socialism," "reactionary socialism," "Catholic socialism," "military socialism," "bourgeois socialism," etc. There are lots of socialisms that Marx does not like. The Second International has been given a bad rap by modern Marxism. There's no need to repeat the history of the Second International, especially not when it comes to 1914. Nevertheless, here was an organization that consisted of many hundreds of thousands of workers. If we were to name one organization responsible for what we can call "the democratic breakthrough," it would be the Second International. The ideologues of capitalism like to join together capitalism with democracy, as if the two go together. But I've had many jobs in my life, and I've never had a boss whom I could surrender his position and electing the boss. I've never heard him suggest voting as to how to distribute their profits. There's certainly no vote when it comes to sacking people, and the same goes for other decisions. No, the fact of the matter is that it's an anti-democratic system. It's a system of exploitation of the many by the few. And the history of capitalism is a history of opposing the extension of democracy. The impulse to extend democracy has come not from above, but from below. It's the Second International that was decisive, at least in Europe, in making that breakthrough.

I'll have differences with Adam. But, actually, our exchange in the *Weekly Worker* began when we both

took the same side in condemning the idea that market socialism was something to aspire to. We both reject that idea. I take Lenin as my starting point. *State and Revolution* was written in around September of 1917 and breaks off abruptly. Within that pamphlet—based on his own Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, the program of the early congress of the German Social Democracy in 1875—Lenin says that there are two stages: We can't just go straight to communism, we can't just get rid of money stage, we can't just get rid of the state straightaway, we can't just get rid of classes straightaway. There's got to be a transition period. Marx called it the first stage of communism. Lenin said, "okay the first stage of communism, I'll call it socialism." And, certainly, that idea was common amongst Marxists in the Second International.

What about today? Well, we've got a dreadful history to explain—but why, in spite of that dreadful history, am I still a committed Marxist, someone who believes in socialism as the first stage of communism? When I look at capitalism, I don't think it's the last word in civilization, it creates the basis for human freedom, but cannot deliver it. And human beings by their very nature aspire to freedom. By "freedom," I mean the full development of each individual, and that that is preconditioned on the full development of all. That is what I understand by communism.

I don't think the Soviet Union had anything to do with socialism by 1928. The First Five-Year Plan, to me, marked a complete rupture. If you look at before that, you had desperate people clutching on to an extraordinary desperate situation, breaking their own program, hoping upon hope that events would rescue them. Originally, they had backed on the German revolution, but it failed.

Today the worst socialism has been reduced to meaningless twaddle. If you listen to Jeremy Corbyn, socialism means being nice and justice and equality. Well, while everybody wants those things, politically this is nonsense. Jeremy Corbyn wants to tinker with capitalism, but that's got nothing to do with socialism. Ditto SYRIZA, who just become an agent of austerity. This is

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answer. He said, “You’re talking about communism, I’m talking about socialism.” This brings us to the question of the scientific difference between communism and socialism. No one even thought there was a difference between communism and socialism before, let alone a scientific distinction. Now it is true, as Jack has mentioned, that in 1875 Marx talked about a first phase of communist society, and a higher phase of communist society. But he could have equally talked about the first phase of socialist society, and a higher phase of socialist society. The important thing is that they were two phases of the same society, not two different societies. They were phases of a classless, stateless, moneyless, and wageless society, based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production. But Lenin didn’t even have the same view as Marx’s first phase of communist or socialist society. Here is a quote from *State and Revolution* on the correct functioning of the first phase of communist society: “All citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers, all citizens become employees and workers of a single, nation-wide syndicate. All that’s required is you work equally, and your proper share of work, and get paid equally.”<sup>3</sup> This is not the abolition of the wages system, which socialists in the Second International had stood for up till then. This is the integration of the wages system. It is, in fact, state capitalism—the wages system under new management, by state bureaucrats. It was state capitalism, which is what the Bolsheviks went on to establish. Lenin said this in 1918. It is alright to talk about 1928, but right from 1918 it was state capitalism. Because the Bolsheviks stayed in power, because they had a certain prestige among militant workers, and, of course, because they had the propaganda machine of the Russian state, their definition of socialism, which was really state capitalism, was able to triumph, and hence the confusion that’s with us.

Now, this isn’t a meeting to discuss the failures of Bolshevism. This is a meeting to discuss the failures of social democracy. So what were the failings of social democracy? Well what they had as their objective in their maximum program, socialism, but they also had a minimum program, which involved economic, social, and democratic reforms to capitalism. What this meant is that they were the prisoners of their non-socialist supporters and, eventually, they became simple bourgeois-democratic reform parties. At the turn of the century, the revisionist Eduard Bernstein said, “listen, what we are—you might as well come out and recognize that that’s what the German Social Democratic Party is—is a bourgeois-democratic party of reform.” This was rejected, but it made no difference to the practice of the German Social Democratic Party. Of course, what demonstrated that these parties were built on an unsound basis was the outbreak of the First World War, when the members of the Social Democratic Party in the Reichstag voted for the war just as their counterparts in France voted to join the coalition of national unity.

It has been downhill ever since. After World War One, the social democratic parties of Europe frequently participated in bourgeois coalition government. Bernstein was vindicated. But they claimed, or their theoreticians claimed, that what they were trying to do was gradually transform capitalism into a different type of society. But, of course, what happened was the opposite. They gradually got transformed into parties no different from those that they were competing against. In time they did not even claim to be socialist, just better managers of capitalism. Of course, when they got a chance they frequently failed. I agree with what Jack said about denouncing the Labour Party, but in his paper I’m sure it says “Vote Labour” at election time.

What do we do today? What William Morris said, actually: make socialists. What we should do is not keep socialism under a bush, but shout it from the rooftops: “We are socialists. Socialism is the only viable alternative to capitalism. It provides the only lasting framework within which the problem which capitalism serves up can be dealt with.” If we don’t do this, then we just analyze what politics could be, or has been. And we have an endless series of demonstrations and protests—not even to get more reforms of capitalism, but to stop existing reforms being taken away. This is no way to work toward a socialist society. If you are a socialist, what you should be doing is proclaiming and propagating socialism, which is what we do in the Socialist Party.

**Robin Halpin:** What is socialism? When I first read the invitation to speak this evening, I was puzzled not a little over the title of the meeting. How are we to read the word “is”? For there’s no obvious referent in today’s world. Reading further in the invitation, I saw that socialism implied social democracy. I But the moment of social democracy has come and gone, having been weighed on the scales of history and found wanting, sorely wanting. The core defect of social democracy was its dependence on the state as the means by which socialism was to be realized. All the bitter quarrels in the history of left movements revolve primarily around the question of the state: Was the state a neutral instrument or one of class power? Could the existing state be captured by the organs of the working class, and used to implement socialism or did the existing state have to be smashed (only to be replaced immediately by the party state—a different state to be sure, but a state nonetheless)?

Given this statist mindset, anyone rational enough to question the need for a state was derided for suffering from an infantile disorder, and placed beyond the pale of civilized discourse as an anarchist or council communist. This mindset cemented itself after 1917 with the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, and a year later of the accession to office of the Social Democrats in Germany, but its origins lay in the very roots of the Social Democratic project. So, what then is wrong with treating the state as an instrument of social transformation? To answer this, we need to look at an essential relation often overlooked or just taken for granted, the relation of the state to the nation. For all the talk about the relation

of the state to the working class, the far more important relation to the nation has been neglected. For what is the state, if not the central body through which the interests of the nation cohere? This is true of any modern state. But, then again, nations don’t stand as an autonomous entity, but as one nation among others in a world of cutthroat capitalist competition. Each state must look out for its own national interest in this dog-eat-dog world of competing nations.

With competition taking place continuously on the economic level as well as on the strategic military level, the state’s ability to reconcile different class and group interests within the nation or within a socialist state all takes place within the framework of this competitive struggle. Looked at like this, we can see clearly the sheer horror of socialists aligning themselves with any state. In order to be credible as a party owning state power, social democrats had to show their complete loyalty to that state in its struggle to advance its own interests in a world of states.

When we see this as the reality confronting social democracy, the catastrophe of 1914 becomes easier to understand. Social democrats, long before the outbreak of war, had thrown in their lot with the state. Therefore, they came to its defense in its hour of need. This rapturous acclamation of patriotic feeling was not some kind of betrayal as Lenin claimed, but the perfectly logical outcome of their underlying political theory. Thus, through the war, what I call “the armed triangle” of the party, state, and nation cemented: Through the party the working class was inducted into the sanctuary of the political nation. It is true that Lenin, to his credit, rejected this logic of nationalism and its call for war, but not the underlying statist politics that informed it. This was shown a few years later, when, upon forming his own state after the Bolshevik coup d’état, he proceeded to pursue the same logic of national interest in his dealings with other states. The true nature of the party, state, and nation then received its first outing in the war he initiated and pursued against the newly emerged Polish national state, where he encouraged Russian workers and peasants to go and slaughter their Polish counterparts in yet another vicious war of conquest. Facing a pre-modern Tsarist state, the socialist program would only be implemented in Russia after the overthrow of the existing state apparatus, and its replacement with a social democratic party state. Once this had been achieved, the same logic of nation and state was bound to assert itself. And so it did.

With this history, with an understanding of the consequences of social democracy’s relation to the state and nation, we can see just how empty phrases such as “Socialist Internationalism” are. In fact, social democracy demands of the working class that it defend the nation heart and soul. And that includes demanding the workers of one country go forth to slaughter the workers of other countries. As World War One ground on, and the older bourgeois political parties became discredited. It was social democracy that kept the masses in line, both on the front and in the industrial cities. So, for connoisseurs of dialectics there occurred a fine example of dialectical inversion: The party started out depending on the state only to become the state’s own basis.

Why then did social democracy as a statist strategy collapse at the end of the 1970s? This comes back to my problem with the question *What is socialism?* The true reason is it had fulfilled its historical mission. The working class was now fully integrated into the nation and its political consciousness saw its interests as identical to those of the nation of which it is now a part. What then, can be said of the attempt to reboot the whole enterprise, as it has been suggested by some today? I can only claim that the notion is utterly quixotic and doomed to failure. For in whatever form it takes, it will again be dependent upon the state for its fulfillment and the same logic of statist politics within a context of international competition will force it to defend national interests. Even if it were to be nationalized everything, and eliminate the privately owned corporations and banks, and set up democratic institutions for the control of these things, it would alter nothing in the fundamental constellation of power.

The problem facing any social democratic enterprise is part of a larger problem facing anyone wanting to be a political force in the world today. The whole sphere of the political as the arena in which competing interests within the nation settle their differences and share out the spoils of capitalist exploitation is quite simply dying on its feet. The important reason is not subjective but objective: it has to do with the nature of mature capitalism in the wake of the third industrial revolution, or micro-electronic revolution. Capital has entered into a period of terminal crisis as the capital relation itself comes up against its own absolute intrinsic limits the result of which is the driving of living labor out of production through automation without, for the first time in capitalist history, there being a compensatory expansion in markets arising from new productive industries that can absorb the labor being cast back on the labor market.

The upshot of this is a massive shortfall in realized surplus value that forms the lifeblood of both the new rounds of expanding reproduction of capital and of the revenue available to the state for purposes of social welfare and infrastructure spending. This hard fact remains totally untheorized in current Marxist thinking, which tends to look at the state in purely political terms, as a struggle of competing wills, while neglecting the politico-economic structure of the state, which since the capitalism’s inception has been a tax gathering machine, creaming off a portion of realized surplus value may befor its own ends. I mean real money as realized surplus value and not fictitious capital generated by the financial sector. This is the true reason for austerity, not those superficial explanations that rely on *ad hominem* arguments about greedy financiers and spiteful Tories. To attempt to pursue a social democracy while ignoring this fundamental truth is no longer feasible. The political sphere itself is dying on its feet. The political actors condemn themselves to irrelevance. Even the parties formed on the basis of classical social democracy are

little more than historical reenactment societies. Their antics might be amusing to watch, but they are uninteresting in bringing about real social change.

So where do we go from here? Before anything can happen, an enormous amount of thought and theoretical clarification must be done. This is something that leftist groupuscules have always shied away from. I want to end with a few words from William Morris, a true Marxist and enthusiastic student of *Capital*. I’ve adjusted his words slightly to allow for the inherent sexism of 19<sup>th</sup>-century speech, but this is what he wrote: “I pondered all these things, and how people fight and lose the battle. And the things they fought for come about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, turns out to be not what they meant, and other people have to fight for what they meant, under another name.”<sup>4</sup> That is our task, nothing less.

## Responses

**JC:** I am a Bolshevik and a Leninist. I do not call myself a social democrat, but it depends on what one means by it. These words have changed. For me, what Lenin was saying in 1917 is orthodox Marxism. What he actually said is not, “We shall now proceed to the socialist revolution.” What he said is that what Russia could do is make steps in the direction of socialism. And, of course, what he wanted by socialism is what he took from Karl Marx in 1875, when he wrote that the Communist Project begins where capitalism is—any capitalism. What Marx explains is, yes, of course our aim is to get rid of money, to get rid of the state—the full development of each as the condition for the full development of all, and all the rest of it. But precisely what you have in the first stage is a state. That is orthodox Marxism. It was the anarchists who turned around and said that the state is going to be oppressive and end in disaster. As Marx and Engels famously explained about the Paris Commune, this is a different state: an anti-bureaucratic state that is in transition, to ceasing being a state.

Against Robin, I ask: If we go back to Lenin, what did he actually believe in October and November of 1917? “We seize power, then we’re going to be left in isolation, we’re going to starve, and the working class is going to dissolve—they either die, or they join the Red Army and die, or they go back and become peasants.”<sup>5</sup> No! The whole strategy is based on the German Revolution sparking off the European revolution. It is precisely based on the perspective of turning what had been an imperialist war into a civil war against our own ruling class.

Now Adam’s version of social democracy. On one side, there was Lenin and the Bolsheviks and the Menshevik Internationalists—Martov and the rest (who were against the war). Then in Germany, there’s official Social Democracy, which backed the Kaiser. If we look at what was going on in Germany, it was quite clearly not the case that all German workers were loyal to the Kaiser state. You had mutinies being inspired by what was going on in Russia. I would take more of a nuanced view about pre-1914 social democracy. Lenin did not back the Mensheviks, or democrats in power after February, he opposed the state after the abdication of the Tsar. I have got no wish to waste a wintry day and storm Buckingham Palace. I don’t want to join a reenactment society. But in terms of the past, I don’t think that we want to just wipe the slate and say that there’s nothing valuable there. You’ve already been quoting Marx, you looked at *Capital*, but when it comes to program, what you say is “Forget the past, let’s begin anew.” But what the hell do we begin with?

**AB:** To come to your point about social democracy, or reformism: the Labour Party in this country, like social democratic parties elsewhere, thought that there is a national solution to social problems, but there isn’t! Capitalism is a worldwide system, it’s an international capitalist system. So if they get state power in one particular country, what they can do is limited. They cannot introduce more and more social reforms. They can’t increase social benefits or wages, because that would undermine the competitiveness of the capitalist industries of the country on the world market. Jeremy Corbyn is just Harold Wilson the Second.

Capitalism cannot be reformed to work in the interests of the majority of the working class. So everything you say about why social democracy failed to us, it’s even worse today. Reformists today are not even campaigning for new reforms. I suppose we can go back to the 1970s and have arguments about what Lenin said and did, and how he was wrong, but there is never going to be another Bolshevik-type revolution in Western capitalist countries.

Lenin knew in 1917 that if he seized power, he would have a problem organizing industry and production. What he looked to was not what Marx had written 40 or 50 years previously, but to the German war economy. He said, “That is what we should do. We want state monopoly controlling the economy, controlled not by the Junkers but by the Bolshevik Party.” This is what he said in 1917-1918. In 1921, they developed the New Economic Policy. What was it? It was the development of capitalism under the control of what he called the proletarian state, in other words the development of capitalism under the Bolshevik state. And, of course, you give the standard justification as to why he thought he could get away with seizing power in the name of socialism: He was expecting a socialist revolution in Germany. But that was never on the cards. What was on the cards was a democratic revolution. So Lenin made a complete miscalculation.

**RH:** How are we going to stop our enemies from retaliating against us if we don’t have a state? This is the argument which we’ve heard a thousand times. Well, certainly organs of some kind must be created for the purpose of preventing the violent crushing of a revolution and new social order. But these have to be in the nature of ad hoc organizations that dissolve once their function has been fulfilled. Because if they concretize themselves into a central state organism, then you’re stuck with that. There is no such thing as the withering away of the

state: Its prime function is to stay in existence.

It’s probably true that some of the Bolsheviks—perhaps Lenin himself—believed that a revolution in Russia would spark a revolution elsewhere in the West, primarily in Germany. But there was never any hope of that succeeding. No advanced capitalist state has ever been overthrown by a frontal assault of its own working class, never in two hundred years. And if it did not happen after the horrors of the First World War, it’s hard to imagine how it could ever happen. I believe revolution will come about through the collapse of the capitalist order because of the increasing dysfunction at the political-economic level. So far in this discussion I’m the only one who has raised the relationship of the state to the underlying political-economic order of society—as if politics was a completely autonomous level of activity that had nothing to do with economic realities!

## Q&amp;A

*For Marx and Engels, the potential for social democracy was the potential of the proletariat’s leadership of the reconstitution of the democratic republic, itself the result of the bourgeois revolution, in order to go to beyond it and overcome it on its own basis. By contrast, often on the Left today, the working class is actually an object of administration. It seems to be rackets in production, or worse, an aggregate interest group. Why does Stalinism or the welfare state seems to mean social democracy today? What kinds of potential lies in presently trying to transform the Labour Party into a socialist party? And why is it the case that Lenin could have believed in 1920 that Labour entryism into the Second International was a win-win situation, and why, in the 1930s, when the CPGB was rejected from the party, was the working class not convinced of the Labour leadership’s bankruptcy? What’s changed between 1920 and 1930? What has changed from 1920 to 2015? Another way of putting that question is actually, what is the potential, if any, of Corbyn?*

**RH:** Sorry, we were asked to speak about what socialism is. Corbyn, the Labour Party. Momentum have got nothing whatever to do with socialism. They are a bunch of state apparatchiks. Little rackets like Momentum have no future whatsoever.

1920, in fact the whole interwar period, could be seen as one large drawing of breath on the part of the capitalist system before its last final massive expansion. The interwar period saw the construction of new mass production industries and the enormous expansion of the working class. This carried on through the war into the 1950s and 60s. But what you have now is the opposite process—the process of decomposition. Strategies of the past presumed that productive industry was expanding on a massive scale. Now we’re seeing the opposite, as living labor is gradually cast out of productive industries. So the underlying political economic basis of strategies based on mass working class organization are dead or dying.

**JC:** What Marx and Engels meant by the democratic republic is not the United States as it is now or France as they are now, let alone a monarchy like we live under in Britain that supposedly is a democracy. What they meant by the democratic republic is something the working class fights for. The other phrase they used in the same context as the democratic republic was the dictatorship of the proletariat. Of course what they meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat was not unmediated force. It meant simply, rule by the majority. The Labour Party has never been a socialist party. Around 1904, the Labour Party applied to affiliate with the International, and there was a debate about whether it should be allowed to. Karl Kautsky said, “Well, it will start to become a socialist party.” I don’t think that’s entirely wrong, looking at it at the time. Lenin also seconded that particular motion. But they all agreed that it was not any kind of socialist party. They hoped that it would develop in that direction, but quite clearly it was a very strange party that had trade unions affiliated to it. Certainly before 1918 it was simply committed to some sort of liberal reformist program.

We need a program to transform parliament today. I would extend that to trade unions, indeed to every sphere of existing society. We want to transform existing society, especially the institutions of the working class, no matter how perverted, how inadequate. I would include the Labour Party in that. What is the problem in that perspective? It is quite possible that the attempt will fail, but not to try is a fundamental mistake. That is why I disagree with Robin—looking at Corbyn and saying, “Oh it’s nothing.” Well, what is anything then? It was the significant movement today in Britain? When I listen to Robin, I imagine we are in 1914: “Ah, no comrade, let’s not go for a civil war. Let’s not try to overthrow our ruling classes.” To me, the lesson of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not that it had to be like that. It is very easy to look at past history and say well it had to be. It is obviously quite a strong argument: this is how things turned out. But simply to look at things as they turned out is to take a one-dimensional view. History is full of all sorts of different possibilities that we can analyze. You say that the German revolution was impossible. But as Clara Zetkin said: “What is fascism? Fascism is the punishment brought upon the working class for its failure to carry out a revolution.”

**AB:** The title of this meeting is “What is socialism?” We’ve now come to the second part, “What is not socialism?” I’ll go through it: socialism is not nationalization, socialism is not government ownership, socialism is not what existed in Russia or Cuba, and socialism is not the Labour government. As Willie said, the Labour Party is not a socialist party, has never been a socialist party, and will never be. Socialists should not join the Labour Party and should not have anything to do with it. It is a reform party that thinks that you can make capitalism better for workers. You can’t. So, the Labour Party is a waste of time. I have never voted for the Labour Party,

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though I’m sure Jack has. That’s up to him.

There is not going to be a civil war. That is not going to be the way we get to socialism. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx and Engels thought it was possible under certain circumstances to have a peaceful transition to socialism. They were in favor of a democratic republic, of universal suffrage. And, under certain circumstances, the socialist working class could use universal suffrage to win control of the republic and then use that control to abolish capitalism.

Before Marx and Engels were socialists, both were bourgeois democrats. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we don’t have any barricades. A socialist revolution is going to come about when the majority of people want to understand it, and organize democratically to achieve it. Robin says that capitalism will collapse. I don’t think it will. But if it did and there were no socialist majority, the result is not going to be socialism. Herman Cahn wrote a book in 1920, *The Collapse of Capitalism*, saying that capitalism was going to collapse in the 1920s. James Maxton of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the 1930s said capitalism has only got a few weeks to go. Capitalism is still here! Capitalism won’t collapse. It can stagger on from crisis to crisis until people decide consciously to put an end to it.

*Jack talked about how socialism itself is a word that came up in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adam talked about lower and higher forms of communism, that they are both a continuation of, and a change from, the previous form of society. These points raise the questions of working class continuation or transformation of bourgeois revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the role of parties. Robin negatively characterized the relationship between party and state, in terms of the failure of struggles for socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the party becoming dependent on the state, and the state becoming dependent on the party. What ought to be the relationship between capitalism and socialism, and the party and state?*

**RH:** There is an enormous misconception prevalent on the Left for a very long time. It is partly Marx’s fault—not everything Marx wrote can be let through without criticism, and historical materialism is one of them. There is a line of thought running through Marx’s mature work whereby he melds Hegel’s theory of history together with Adam Smith’s notion of successive historical stages. He then attributes more logic to the unfolding of successive stages of history than can legitimately be maintained. The coming of capitalism was not the logical outcome of the decline of feudalism. There is also no logical succession from capitalism to communism. It has to be a total break. So about a dialectical relationship between capitalism and socialism, the relation there actually is not dialectical. It is a simple negation, not a unity that self-differentiates to separate poles. It is something absolutely separate.

**JC:** I take a very different view. We easily forget that the working class is rapidly expanding on a global scale. I don’t accept the talk of a post-industrial society. Socialism comes out of the contradictions of capitalism—crucially, the existence of an ever bigger class of workers. Communism is not just a good idea, but an actual historic movement. I believe in historical materialism and all the rest of it. I stand for peaceful revolution. Any Marxist who says “we want a violent revolution” is an idiot. The real question is do we bank on it? Well, that, too, is crazy. We cannot preclude the possibility that they will use violence against us. The Red Army, when it was formed, was very ad hoc. It also lost every engagement with the counter-revolutionaries. And what would have been the result if the counter-revolutionaries had reached Petrograd? I don’t think it is unfair to compare that with the sort of horrors that the Nazis unleashed in Germany and across Europe. So, yes, of course we all want an ad hoc state. Sometimes life is not so generous.

A party is an absolute necessity. I do not mean the sort of party the Bolsheviks and Lenin were forced to become after 1917. That is not the model we should aspire to. The same goes for the Third International. In my view, parties need to be united in terms of agreed actions. Meanwhile there should be an encouragement of debate, thinking, and investigation, not some things that characterize the present-day Left is characterized by.

In terms of the state, my view certainly is not that we should aim to take hold of the existing state. We want to disperse the existing armed forces, to get rid of the judges. I’m sure Adam would agree with that. But we lack a strategy for taking hold of the existing state and using it for our own purposes.

In terms of how Lenin used the term state capitalism: This is applied to conditions of Russia, when there was starvation, when they were isolated, and when they were beginning with an economy that had practically ceased to exist. The majority of people had gone back to individual peasant agriculture. It is not something that Lenin aspired to. I readily admit that his model was Germany—WWI Germany, of course.

**AB:** I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the materialist conception of history. It explains both the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the transition from capitalism to socialism. It’s through the development of the means of production that different classes come into existence.

The party is not separate from the workers or from socialism. The party is the working class organized politically to get rid of capitalism and replace it by socialism. I am opposed to the idea of a vanguard party that could lead the workers, opposed to the idea of a parliamentary party that is going to lead the workers. We accept the old Chartist slogan, “Peacefully if we may, forcibly if we must.”

What happens after socialism has been established? I don’t think Marx used the words “lower stage” and “higher stage.” He talked about the “first stage.” In

the first stage, it will not be possible to attain the full implications of the principle, “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” There will need to be restrictions on consumption, because the priority is going to be stopping starvation and people living in slums. But that will be society already based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production of society—without class society, without state society, without money, without people working for wages.

On the party and the state: You know, after we, the working class, abolish the monarchy and the House of Lords, the next thing they abolish is the socialist party. You don’t need a party in a socialist system. Why would you need it? There’d be no socialist party in a socialist society. It would not be needed.

*In The Class Struggle in France, Marx says, “Socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution. The class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, of the production relations on which those class distinctions rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to those relations of production, and to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that correspond to all that came before.” The question is not whether you need the state or not—it’s there. The only question is: Is it a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie that is reinforcing the tremendously lopsided distribution of the productive forces on a global scale, thousands of years of the division of mental and labor, patriarchy and everything else, or is it the dictatorship of the proletariat that’s trying to do away with all that?*

**AB:** But Engels, in 1895, wrote a preface to that pamphlet, and said, “Look, we were wrong. We thought there was going to be an immediate bourgeois revolution followed by a proletarian revolution.” He also said that “the days of barricades and street fighting are over, an unconscious minority leading—those days are over, we’ve got universal suffrage now.” He was wrong. He had illusions about the German Social Democratic Party. It was winning elections and getting more and more votes, and he had the illusion that this would eventually lead to the establishment of socialism.

So let’s make that point with Engels. In fact, he didn’t refute Marx, but put it in its historical context. Marx only saw eighty days of the Paris Commune. Marx never saw a telephone, a radio, a motorcar, plastics. Things have moved on since that time. The means of production have developed much more, which means that we can easily go over straightforward to socialism if people want it. We don’t need transitional periods and so on. In fact, that’s what’s happening now, the transition is taking place right now. When people’s ideas gradually change in a socialist direction, that’s the transition.

**RH:** We’re just going to have to disagree on the question of the state. I’d like to reiterate that if you start off with the state, you’re stuck with the state forever as a self-perpetuating machine that sets itself up above the rest of the population. If you’ve got that, you don’t get communism.

**JC:** Proletarian democracy began with the impulse that the working class had back in the 1830s and 1840s with the Chartist movement. They demanded “One person, one vote.” The question is, what do you do with that vote? If it’s just Labour, Tory, Liberal, Scottish Nationalist, whatever, that is not going to get us anywhere. If we can persuade people to vote for a socialist party, that’s a different thing. I don’t simply say that 19<sup>th</sup> century socialism was impossible, that 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism was impossible, but the horrible situation we’re living through at the moment is our fate.

*The Abbé Sieyès said, “The Third Estate was nothing, but it will be everything.” The increasing obsolescence of labor still leads to social relations based upon labor and people’s demand for their bourgeois right. My understanding of State and Revolution is that, even when all the capitalists have been appropriated by the dictatorship of the proletariat, problems would continue because the workers—who equally function on the bourgeois ideology of labor—would be demanding that bourgeois right. So, why did Marx think that there needed to be a transition period—as Engels put it, a “semi-state”—that would wither away. What would its function be?*

**AB:** You say first phase of communist or socialist society is the same as the dictatorship of the proletariat, but it can’t be, because if it is genuinely a phase of socialist or communist society, then there would be no longer any proletariat, no longer any classes. Marx has, if you like, three stages. One is the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into socialism. That’s the bit that takes the proletariat. Once that’s over, there’s no more state, there’s no more proletariat. We’ve got socialism or communism. From then on, capitalism, private property rights, no longer exists. The means of production are now available under democratic control to the whole community. Once you’ve done that, you’ve abolished classes, the state doesn’t exist, and you don’t have wages.

*So what is the distinction then, in your conception, between the second and third stage?*

**AB:** Well Lenin conflates the first stage and the first phase of communism. They all do it—all the Trotskyists do it. Ernest Mandel did it in his book *In the Defense of a New Society*. Marx does not talk about a transitional society, he talks about transitional period—from one society to another—which would be more or less rapid.

**JC:** In terms of Lenin’s good old *State and Revolution*, which existed in the idea of everyone being paid. With money or tokens, whatever, but something that approximates to our understanding of money—but according to their labor-time. In other words, if you’re a doctor and I’m a useless whatever I am, and we both work an hour, we receive from society the same. That would be viewed as going towards a society that Adam talked about

where distribution happens on the basis simply of need. In other words, what Lenin envisaged—which is copying Marx back from 1875—is you begin with some recognition of work done. The only justification of the Russian Revolution is a sparking of the European revolution, where that transition is possible.

**RH:** All ideas of transition to socialism are between 70 and 130 years old, all written in very different circumstances. I don’t even know if this idea of “stages” of communism is even remotely helpful. All I would say is that, right from the beginning, you are dealing with a complete break with the ontology of labor. This is where I disagree totally with Jack. The idea that you get what you have worked for is to reproduce the most fundamental aspect of the present society, which is based on the ontology of labor. You don’t even begin transforming society unless you’ve made a total break with the ontology of labor and the use of money. What follows from that will involve examining every single aspect of this society—of production and distribution process, of the exercise of power, of the education of ideologies. Everything examined and reexamined—Does this contribute to human well-being, or is it oppressive? Is it part of the iron cage of the old society? And you work through everything to transform it.

*On the subject of reform and a minimum program: do the speakers think that there is a use for something similar to those minimum programs today for a socialist party? Was the idea of a minimum program of reforms wrong even in the Second International?*

**AB:** Socialists today should not make the same mistake that the social democratic parties of the Second International made: campaigning for socialism by campaigning for a minimum program of reforms. Because that way you attract support not for socialism, but for the various reform measures. This idea is still a popular with the Trotskyites or Trotskyists. They call the minimum program the transitional program, but it is the same thing. The Trotskyists are more honest than the social democrats. They hold it out as bait to try to get people to follow them. But that is a mistake. What we should do as socialists is propagate socialism. Nobody else is doing this. If you read the *Weekly Worker* today, you’ll find all these sorts of campaigns that are going on, “stop this” and “don’t do that.” These are not campaigns for socialism.

**JC:** As a militant defender of the minimum program, yes, definitely. We all want to go towards a communist society. We don’t need to argue about that. The real question is, how the hell do we get there? And in my view, without the minimum program you have no hope whatsoever of getting there. The transitional program of Trotsky in 1938 is a disaster, because all it wants to do is kick the workers that all you need to do is campaign to protect your wages and somehow—almost in spite of yourself—you will become the state power. That is not what I mean by minimum program. The Bolsheviks certainly had a minimum program. German social democracy had a minimum program. Marx and Engels were the authors or inspirers of many a minimum-maximum program. Didn’t Marx call the ten-hours’ bill in *Capital* something like the Magna Carta of the British proletariat?

All the demands of the Chartist movement are technically achievable within capitalism, I readily accept that. That there is a class that actually understands its historic mission, that actually views itself as not just part of capitalism, that doesn’t view itself as a pressure group, or something that’s going to get something from Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn—that does not exist. It is through the minimum program that the working class can form itself as a class. It is in the struggle as a class, it is in these struggles to realize its demands—its demands for education, its demands for time, its demands to have trade-union rights, its demands to have some sort of life within capitalism—that the working class has the potential to transcend capitalism. Without that, it’s all hopeless.

*When Marx writes his Critique of the Gotha Program, the first thing he says is that that program fails to call for the democratic republic. In that respect it goes no further than the free-trade liberal party. Fast forward to Rosa Luxemburg’s argument against Lenin that the Bolsheviks were going to abolish the bourgeois state without replacing it with anything more democratic. So my question is who do you prefer, Lenin or Luxemburg, in regards to socialist democracy?*

**AB:** Rosa Luxemburg wins hands down. When Lenin wrote *What is to be Done?* this was the idea of the vanguard party with military command and structure. She wrote a thing accusing Lenin of being a Blanquist and of seeking to seize power by a vanguard party.

**JC:** It is foolish to counterpose them as if they are opposites. Rosa Luxemburg participated in Russian Social Democratic Labor Party congresses where she voted with the Bolshevik faction on more than one occasion. It is also worth noting, and this will be my criticism of Rosa Luxemburg, that while she established the *Spartakusbund*, it’s not a party! So, in terms of her faction work, where is the party going to come from? I think she relies on spontaneity. That’s why the German Revolution fails. I don’t think that it’s a question of democracy, on the one side, and dictatorship on the other. This is a complete misreading of Lenin. And I’m surprised that Adam, at a time when we have presumably mostly read Lars T. Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered*, maintains the view that Lenin wanted to establish some kind of military vanguard party—this is a complete myth. The problem is that we project back into history. We project much later disputes and positions back on to history. The reality was that when Lenin wrote *What is to be Done?* no one took any notice—because it was a standard idea that suffused the entire movement in Russia and elsewhere.

Lastly, do we really think that, when Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power, this was a head-on assault? That you have, on the one side, the Bolshevik Party and,

on the other, the official Russian Army? My understanding of the Russian Revolution is it was made by the Russian Army and Russian Navy. The same goes for the German Revolution. The same must go for any revolution. We are the majority class. We can win over to our party not only many of our brothers and sisters in the armed forces, we can win over members of the bourgeoisie. As I understand it, more people died in Eisenstein’s reenactment of the October Revolution in the film *October* than actually died in the *doing* of it!

**RH:** Lenin saw the project of creating socialism as being something to be accomplished by his party and his little clique alone. It’s true that in Tsarist Russia, any independent organizations were made impossible because of police pressure. But, after the collapse of Kerensky’s government, in this meticulously well-planned coup d’état, there was no further need for this kind of secretiveness. And yet, what does Lenin do? Within a year of seizing power, he’s abolished the organs of working-class power, for no other reason than to aggrandize draw all power into his own hands! There was absolutely no need for him to abolish the soviets other than that. And if you look at the history of the early years of the Bolshevik Party in power, everything that they did was about grabbing as much as they could for themselves without any regard to any other force within the working class. Rosa Luxemburg is much more interesting, because she does not lay down these meticulous plans about how power is to be controlled. Power is to remain with the working class. It is clear throughout her entire writings that if the revolution is not the revolution of the working class, then it isn’t a revolution at all.

## Closing Remarks

**RH:** The prospects for socialism are grim at best. Socialist or communist consciousness is virtually absent from wider sections of society. There’s no sense of anything whatsoever fomenting anywhere in the capitalist world that shows a course out of this situation. But, the decline of capitalism, the decline of value production proceeds apace. We are beginning to see the collapse of capitalist institutions at the political and economic level and this is something we will see more of in the coming years. It is a question of how people respond to that collapse



# The fatal embrace of the Left and the Labour Party

## Ralph Miliband’s changing positions on Labour

Michael Fitzpatrick



Former Labour MP Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn in front of the gates of Downing Street in 2009.

1960: “The last general election has had at least one beneficial result: it has shocked many more people into a recognition of the fact that the Labour Party is a sick party.... It is within its power to retrace its steps and dedicate itself anew to the socialist policies which are its only alternative.”<sup>1</sup>  
1976: “The belief in the effective transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of socialist policies is the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone.”<sup>2</sup>  
1994: “The best that the left can hope for in the relevant future is the strengthening of left reformism as a current of thought and policy in social democratic parties.”<sup>3</sup>

For more than 30 years the radical academic Ralph Miliband wrestled with the question of how the Left should confront the problem of the Labour Party. In the 1960s, he insisted that the Left should work within the party to win it over to the cause of socialism. In the 1970s, he accepted that it was futile to attempt to transform Labour and argued that the Left should organize an independent socialist party. In the 1980s, he collaborated with left-wing initiatives inside and outside the Labour Party. In his final, posthumously-published, response to the emergence of New Labour in the 1990s he signaled the Left’s abandonment of any hope of an existence independent of Labour.  
Miliband’s writings on the Labour Party reflect the wider predicament of the British left in which he was a life-long active participant. The incapacity of the Left to assert its political independence of Labour condemned it to irrelevance as the Labour Party itself entered a phase of apparently terminal decline after the demise of New Labour.

### “Critical support”: the Left in the 1970s

Though Miliband in 1960 diagnosed a “deep organic disorder” afflicting the Labour Party, he was confident that the Left could challenge its “hesitant, fumbling, petulant—and boring” parliamentary leadership.<sup>4</sup> He recommended the strategy of pressing the party to “retrace its steps” and “dedicate itself anew” to the cause of “common ownership” as the “central and distinctive purpose” codified in Clause IV of its 1919 constitution.<sup>5</sup> The optimistic spirit of the New Left, which had recently emerged from the paralyzing grip of the Communist Party over the Left and the labor movement, survived the disappointments of Harold Wilson’s Labour governments of the late 1960s. The Left was boosted by the upsurge in trade union militancy and student radicalism that reached a peak in the wave of strikes and demonstrations that culminated in the collapse of Edward Heath’s Conservative government in 1974.  
By the late 1970s, the tide had turned in favor of the established order. The onset of recession and the return of a Labour government led to the negotiation of the “Social Contract” with the trade union leaders. This agreement drew the unions into sharing responsibility for resolving the economic crisis. The unions’ endorsement of restraints on wages and public spending rapidly dampened industrial militancy. The labor movement’s acceptance of the Social Contract disoriented the Left, which fragmented as a result.  
Miliband recognized that “the present condition of socialists” was “one of severe theoretical and political crisis”.<sup>6</sup> He acknowledged that “twenty years after 1956 [the crisis of the Communist Party], the main problem for the socialist left in Britain is still that of its own organization into an effective political formation”.<sup>7</sup> A “political renewal” now demanded abandoning the “illusion” that Labour could be won to socialism in favor of a “challenge to the domination of the Labour Party”.<sup>8</sup> He insisted that this required “the formation of a socialist party free from the manifold shortcomings of existing organisations”.<sup>9</sup> Miliband concluded with a characteristically muted call to the rank and file: “socialists who believe that the time has come to move on should begin to explore seriously what can be done about it”.<sup>10</sup>

As the 1979 general election and Margaret Thatcher’s historic victory approached, the various groupings of the Left put the goal of returning a Labour government before that of building an organization independent of Labour. Left-wingers were highly critical of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, particularly over their imposition of wage restraints and public spending cuts, measures that precipitated the strikes of the 1978-79 “Winter of Discontent”. Yet as the election drew near, the Left followed its customary procedure of suspending hostilities for the duration of the election in favor of offering “critical support” to the Labour Party.  
In September 1978, I was the co-author of a pamphlet entitled *Who Needs The Labour Party?*, which advocated an abstentionist position in the forthcoming general election.<sup>11</sup> This pamphlet was published by the recently formed Revolutionary Communist Tendency, which became the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1981. It advanced a critique of the state socialist traditions of the Labour Party and of its historic commitment to the interests of the labor bureaucracy rather than the cause of the working class. It dismissed the Left’s support for Labour as “the lesser evil” to the Tories as an adaptation to the prevailing outlook of the labor movement. It pointed out that encouraging militants “to support Labour critically is to ask them to do what they are already doing”.<sup>12</sup>  
The aim of the abstentionist strategy was “to counterpose an independent political and organisational alternative to Labour”.<sup>13</sup> This approach provoked a uniformly hostile response from all sections of the Left, whose members campaigned actively for Labour and fiercely resented calls for an independent alternative. *Who Needs the Labour Party?* concluded with a declaration that, as well as refusing to support Labour, the RCT intended to make “the questions of Ireland and racism living issues during the election campaign”.<sup>14</sup> (As well as supporting Labour, the Left continued to turn a blind eye to the war in Ireland and, apart from a narrow focus on the fascist National Front, largely ignored racist attacks and immigration controls).  
**In and out of Labour in the 1980s**  
The 1980s was a grim period for the Left. Weakened by deindustrialisation and mass unemployment, the trade unions endured one setback after another, culminating in the miners’ strike of 1984-85. Labour experienced successive general election defeats in 1983 [under Michael Foot] and 1987 [under Neil Kinnock], allowing Margaret Thatcher a protracted ascendancy. While the miners’ strike exposed the limitations of Arthur Scargill’s strategy of trade union militancy linked to a perspective of economic nationalism, the Left’s feeble state socialist policies appeared to offer no alternative to the firm smack of Thatcherism.  
Reflecting on the 1983 general election defeat, Miliband recalled forlornly that he had been advocating the “formation of a new independent socialist party” for more than ten years.<sup>15</sup> He expressed his equivocal commitment to this strategy in the convoluted formulation “I am far from convinced that I was mistaken”. Yet he suggested that he was losing confidence in proceeding with this objective, given that there was “a long way to go” and “many large obstacles” in the way.<sup>16</sup>  
Miliband personally pursued a twin-track approach in the 1980s. On the one hand he became a regular member of the Independent Left Corresponding Society, a discussion group meeting on Sunday evenings at the home of Tony Benn, providing intellectual backing for the leading figure of the parliamentary left. On the other, he was a cofounder of the Socialist Society, which organized periodic conferences including prominent left wingers and groups outside the Labour Party.<sup>17</sup>  
In an assessment at the outset of Thatcher’s third term entitled “*The decline and fall of British Labourism*”, I argued that the 1987 general election defeat marked “the end of an era for the British Labour Party”.<sup>18</sup> In response to the question “can Labour survive?”, this

article outlined two possible scenarios.<sup>19</sup> One, identified with the current party leader Neil Kinnock, was that Labour could break its links with the trade unions and become a middle class center party. The other, identified with the remnants of the Left, including Scargill, Benn and Livingstone, was that Labour could “return to old-fashioned socialist aims and values” and attempt to consolidate its relationship with its residual working class base. Over the succeeding years, Labour tested both these strategies to destruction—the former under Tony Blair, the latter under Jeremy Corbyn.

### Not the end of history, but the end of Labour

In the late 1980s, Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed one after another and, in 1991, Stalinist rule came to an end in the Soviet Union itself. These events, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in December 1989, marked the end of the Cold War. They also ended the wider polarizations between communism and capitalism, left and right, which had dominated the world of politics for 150 years. Whether they moved right or left, split or crumbled, (even, whether, as in the case of New Labour, they won elections) social democratic parties throughout the Western world entered a period of decline, dragging the Left down with them.  
One of the first initiatives of Tony Blair when he became party leader in 1994 was to take steps towards the abandonment of Clause IV. This was a decisive gesture to enhance Labour’s appeal to the middle classes by distancing itself from its historic commitment to public ownership. As we have seen, this was the key principle of state socialism, to which Miliband had been urging the party to rededicate itself over the preceding 30 years. It is ironic that it was at this moment that Miliband finally abandoned any attempt to transform or transcend Labour and signaled the Left’s acquiescence to remaining within the decaying corpse of social democracy. **IP**

1 Ralph Miliband, “The Sickness of Labourism” *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 1960), 8.  
2 Ralph Miliband, “Moving On” *Socialist Register* (1976), 128.  
3 Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 148.  
4 Miliband, “Sickness,” 7.  
5 *Ibid.*, 8.  
6 Ralph Miliband, “The Future of Socialism in England” *Socialist Register* (1977), 39.  
7 Miliband, “Moving On,” 128.  
8 *Ibid.*, 140.  
9 *Ibid.*, 140.  
10 *Ibid.*, 140.  
11 Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall, *Who Needs The Labour Party?* (London: Revolutionary Communist Tendency, [1978]).  
12 *Ibid.*, 33.  
13 *Ibid.*, 34.  
14 *Ibid.*, 35.  
15 Ralph Miliband, “Socialist Advance in Britain,” in *Class War Conservatism and Other Essays* (1983) rev. ed (Verso, 2015), 303.  
16 *Ibid.*, 303.  
17 Paul Blackledge, “Labourism and Socialism: Ralph Miliband’s Marxism” *International Socialism* 129 (January 2011).  
18 Mike Freeman, “The Decline and Fall of British Labourism” *Confrontation* 4 (Summer 1988), 17.  
19 *Ibid.*, 76-77.  
20 Miliband, *Sceptical Age*, 148.  
21 David Runciman, “Short Cuts” *London Review of Books* 37:16 (August 27, 2015), 25.  
22 Miliband, “Moving On,” 132-139.  
23 Ken Coates, “Socialists and the Labour Party” *Socialist Register* 10 (1973), 158.  
24 “Theresa May Calls for Snap General Election—Our Chance to Get the Tories Out,” *Socialist Worker* 2550 (April 18, 2017) available online at <socialistworker.co.uk/art/44451/Theresa+May+calls+for+snap+general+election+our+chance+to+get+the+Tories+out>  
25 Richard Seymour, “The Left Must Save Labour,” *Jacobin* (April 2017) available online at <jacobinmag.com/2017/04/jeremy-corbyn-labour-party-theresa-may-snap-election/>

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just about reforming capitalism. In essence, they are no different from Ramsay MacDonald or Clement Attlee, except today the bourgeoisie hasn’t got the same fear of the working class. The Second International expressed the political aspirations of great masses of people. To-day socialism has been reduced to an idea. But if it’s to be a coherent idea, it must be, based, just like Marx’s idea was in the early 1840s, on the objective realities of capitalism, on the direction the working class must take if it’s to find freedom.

**Adam Buick:** We in the SPGB are well qualified to speak about the Second International, because we’re a break-away from it. We are, if you like, pre-Leninist Marxism. We don’t accept Marxist-Leninism. In fact, we are a breakaway from the Social Democratic Federation in 1904. The Socialist Party sent the delegation to a congress of the Second International in that year and, when we found we had to sit next to people like Keir Hardie, we said, “no, this organization’s no good, and we want nothing more to do with it.”  
Anyway, what is socialism? What did the parties of the pre-First World War Second International mean when they said, what we want to replace capitalism with socialism? In 1893, William Morris, who himself had been a delegate to the Second International, took the initiative to draw up a manifesto for the English socialists. And this is what it said: “On this point all socialists agree: our aim, one and all, is to obtain for the whole community, complete ownership and control of the means of transport, the means of manufacture, the mines, and the land. Thus we look to put an end forever to the wage-system, to sweep away all distinction of class, and eventually to establish national and international communism on a sound basis.”<sup>1</sup> Now the fact that this manifesto was signed by such non-Marxists as George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb shows that, at that time, the disagreements between reformists and revolutionaries—between possibilists and impossibilists—were not so much over the aim, the sort of society they wanted to see established, as they were over how to get there. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels shared this idea of socialism. They didn’t invent it; they got it from groups of workers that they met in Paris and in Manchester, who called themselves socialists or communists. This is reflected in the text of the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx talks about the communistic abolition of buying and selling, and when he endorses the “Critical-Utopian Socialists and Communists.” He endorsed their stand on the abolition of the wages system and the view that the state should be converted into the mere superintendence of production. What you’re talking about, the definition of socialism, is classless, stateless, wageless, moneyless, society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production, by and in the interests of the whole community—that is what socialism meant at the time, and that’s also what socialism meant to the parties of the Second International. You can read any lieutenants of those parties, such as August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding, or Rosa Luxemburg, or even Bolsheviks such as Alexander Bogdanov, Stalin, and Lenin himself—they all had this conception of socialism. They regarded socialism as being what the Germans called “natural economy,” which is one where goods are produced purely and simply to be used, not to be sold on the market, not to be bought. Now, I’ll back this up with a quote from August Bebel—the actual face of German Social Democracy. Kautsky was just an intellectual theoretician, the editor of the theoretical newspaper, but Bebel was a worker who was prominent amongst other workers. He wrote a book called *Women and Socialism*, and part of that book is a description of future society where he says, “It does not produce commodities to be bought and sold, but produces the necessities of life, to be used up, consumed, and have no other purpose.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on: “there’ll be no commodities, in the future society, neither can there be any money.” And for the benefit of our Bolshevik friend here, Alexander Bogdanov, in his book called *A Short Course of Economic Science*, which was used as a textbook by the Bolsheviks both before and after the seizure of power, says, “The new society will be based not on exchange, but on natural self-sufficing economy. Between production and consumption of products, there will not be the market buying or selling, but consciously and systematically organized distribution.”<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> This was the common view as to what socialism meant at that time.  
When the *Communist Manifesto* was first translated into English in 1888, Engels explained in his preface why it wasn’t called the *Socialist Manifesto*. In 1848, the word socialism was associated with all sorts of utopian projects by people who rejected the working class struggle for political power. But the implication is that, had the *Communist Manifesto* been written in 1888, it could easily have been called the *Socialist Manifesto*. What this shows is that the words socialism and communism were used interchangeably by Marx and Engels and the other members of the Second International. Now the big change in the meaning of the word socialism came in 1917, when the Bolsheviks were preparing to seize power. Up until then, the Bolsheviks, apart from the question of organization, had been orthodox social democrats. They shared the definition of socialism I’ve just given, but they also shared the view that a socialist revolution was impossible in backward Russia.  
When Lenin returned from exile in Switzerland in April 1917, he shocked even the members of his own party when he declared that, from now on the immediate aim of the Bolsheviks is to seize power—,not to complete the bourgeois revolution, which had been their previous policy, but for socialism, to make a socialist revolution. Many Russians still adhered to the previous definition of socialism, and they said, “What do you mean? You can’t have socialism in Russia, it’s too backward.” Lenin had a quite clever and dishonest