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Socialism Beyond the State

Lise Butler

Alternatives to State Socialism: Other Worlds of Labour in Twentieth Century Britain, ed. Peter Ackers and Alastair Reid. Palgrave MacMillan. 354 pp. £52.99

While rumours of its death may have been greatly exaggerated, the Labour Party has faced acute uncertainties about its political identity and electoral future in recent years. At this moment of reckoning comes the timely volume *Alternatives to State Socialism: Other Worlds of Labour in Twentieth Century Britain*, edited by Peter Ackers and Alastair Reid, and featuring chapters from a diverse group of contributors including senior scholars, independent researchers, and graduate students. The collection represents something of a sequel to Reid and Eugenio's Biagini's 1991 collection *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914*. The editors take aim at dominant currents in labour history which have defined the experience of the British working class primarily in terms of class struggle, and at accounts of the development of left-wing politics which foreground state socialism, nationalisation, and the ascendance and triumph of the welfare state. Responding to a perceived absence of scholarship on alternative left-wing traditions, this volume seeks to excavate a diverse group of forgotten or under-examined movements, leaders and intellectuals between the First World War and the election of Margaret Thatcher that promoted voluntary action, ascribed to pluralistic forms of socialism, and held cautious or critical opinions of state power, nationalisation and the welfare state.

The volume is organised around three categories: the 'other' forms of association that have defined working class life and the institutional culture of the labour movement in the twentieth century; the business and trade union leaders who have shaped the workplace and represented workers to the state; and the intellectuals who, in various ways, have challenged or problematized state-socialism, nationalisation, and top-down economic planning as the route to a fairer and better society. In the first section, Richard Whiting reminds us that trade unions have performed not just an economic function, but served as vital cultural and social institutions in civil society. Rachel Vorberg-Rugh and Angela Whitecross show that the work-centred and state-focused politics of the Labour Party developed alongside and in close relationship with the co-operative movement's alternative tradition of voluntary and consumer-focused activism. Ruth Davidson's chapter on working-class women activists details the many ways in which working class women have served as leaders and agitators in voluntary and civil society organisations, often playing as vital and engaged a role as their better-known middle class counterparts. And Andy Vail's chapter on protestant non-conformism highlights the religious traditions and associations that underpinned the ostensibly secular development of left-wing politics.

The second section of the book focuses on three leaders from different sides of industry: the trade union leaders, Walter Citrine and Frank Chapple, and the chocolate magnate, philanthropist and Quaker Edward Cadbury. John Kimberley shows that Cadbury's concern with working conditions was underpinned by a conviction that the workplace should be a site of community, trust and mutual aid. James Moher's portrait of Citrine highlights the

Trade Union Congress leader's pragmatism, anti-communism, and opposition to Fascism in the lead up to the Second World War. And Calum Aikman argues that Frank Chapple, another fierce anti-communist and the General Secretary of the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union, approached trade union leadership with his own brand of 'common sense' political thought.

The final section, on 'other intellectuals', portrays three distinct but related strands of left-wing political thought which critiqued the centrality of the state to the Labour Party's politics, social policy and identity. David Goodway revisits the intellectual biography of the political theorist G.D.H. Cole to argue against accounts that Cole reconciled his earlier commitment to decentralized and participatory workplace and community-based democracy with Fabian style state socialism in the 1930s, convincingly showing that Cole remained vociferously and unrepentantly committed to a pluralist brand of socialism rooted in the 'small group' until his death in 1959. Stephen Meredith offers a comprehensive portrait of the policy maker, sociologist and social innovator Michael Young's participatory, state-critical and community-focused socialism, and helpfully links up Young's post-war critique of the welfare state with his later support of the Social Democratic Party in the 1980s. And in the collection's penetrating final chapter, Stuart White examines the thought of the anarchist Colin Ward, the socialist feminist Sheila Rowbotham, and the icon of the new left and cultural studies Stuart Hall, to show how all three figures navigated their commitment to social justice with their suspicion of state power in the 1970s and 80s.

This volume does a valuable service in bringing together and highlighting the mutualist, voluntarist, and state-critical strands of left-wing political thought that have long operated alongside and in close conversation with more statist aspects of the Labour tradition. In doing so, it could build more explicitly on work by scholars such as Martin Francis, Jeremy Nuttall, Stephen Brooke, Ben Jackson, and Laurence Black which has shown how ethical socialist and humanist ideas influenced the politics of the post-war left. The collection might also have incorporated a contribution that reflects themes in recent scholarship emphasising the relationship between pluralistic socialism and developments in the humanistic social sciences like sociology, psychology and urban planning which emphasised the social power and importance of small groups to life satisfaction and individual behaviour. The chapters on Young and the thought of Ward, Rowbotham and Hall point to the rich strands of state-critical thinking that flourished within the left during the post-war period, and which were obscured by the Conservative embrace of neo-liberal ideas in the 1980s. They also show that some of the left's most vibrant and critical thinking about the role of the state in peoples' lives occurred between the 1950s and 70s, a period of relative consensus on the left about the need for the welfare state and nationalised industry – suggesting that alternative models of community, social support and mutual aid may have flourished during this period because of rather than in spite of the welfare state.

Alternatives to State Socialism engages lightly with perhaps the most prominent 'other world' of Labour – the well-studied new-liberal, liberal, progressive and revisionist elements of the Labour tradition. This is presumably a deliberate choice, but it does beg the question: to what extent do the state-critical left-wing thinkers and movements portrayed in these chapters represent a distinctly left-wing 'other world', and to what extent have

their ideas been adopted or assimilated into liberal centrist movements within the Labour Party? (as Meredith's chapter on Young shows, his post-war communitarian socialism and pro-consumer politics found a home, for a time, in the SDP) Finally, just how marginal or, indeed, 'other' are the 'other worlds' portrayed in this volume? Figures like Cole and Young were close to Labour power centres in their day, and their ideas were well mined as inspiration for Ed Miliband's One Nation platform between 2010 and 2015. By presenting the 'other worlds' contained in this volume as distinct from the Labour mainstream there is a risk that the complex traditions of the British left become polarized along statist and state-critical lines which obscure tremendous ideological and intellectual richness.

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