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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Emmanuelle Avril and Yann Béliard

Levels of conflict: an integrated approach

What this overview of two centuries of working-class history and organisation has revealed is the permanence of conflicts inside the labour movement, in spite of the abundance of declarations about the value of unity and solidarity. Although the creed ‘United we stand, divided we fall’ has been shared by trade-unionists, co-operators and socialists alike, printed on the front page of their publications, harboured on their posters and banners ever since they formed their first associations, the consensus every labour activist wished for seems to have been superseded more often than not by the most stubborn of facts: dissensus. If the emancipation of the working-class is the common goal, if building a unitary body seems the logical means to reach that aim, how is it that decade after decade the picture has been one of innumerable groups, frequently disunited, and sometimes even at loggerheads?

The chapters in this volume have collectively sought to provide explanations by offering an exploration of three different levels of conflict. At a first level of analysis, they have addressed intra-organisational tensions, i.e. the tensions specific to this or that group. Ophélie Siméon's piece concentrated on the divergences inside Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in the 1830s while Jeremy Tranmer offered his take on the splintering of the CPGB in the late 1980s. Nick Randall and Eric Shaw focused on internal divisions within the Labour Party, the first through a longitudinal study of division within the Parliamentary Labour Party and the second through a study of the unmanageability of the Labour Party under Corbyn.

At a second level of analysis, the chapters have explored inter-organisational tensions, i.e. the tensions between different types of organisations. Thus Steven Parfitt's piece unveiled the rivalry that, from the early 1880s to 1900, opposed the British Knights of Labour to New Model Unions on the one hand and New Unions on the other. In the altogether different context of 1944-45, Anastasia Chartomatsidi compared the positions of three political organisations, the Labour Party, the CPGB and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) over Britain's military intervention in Greece; while David Stewart and Anne Beauvallet respectively examined the Labour Party's relationships with the cooperative movement and the teachers' unions.

The third level of tensions that contributors were invited to analyse was that between labour organisations and spontaneous working-class protests, and more recently ‘new social movements’, where unusual modes of organising may appear. Revisiting the years of the Great Labour Unrest (1910-1914), Lewis Mates and Yann Béliard have resurrected such confrontations between grassroots protests and ‘officialdom’. Anna Clark too, in her chapter on domestic servants, has illuminated the frictions between the initiatives of the ‘unorganised’ and labour movement headquarters. Such confrontations, under an electoral form, are also observed by Fiona Simpkins in contemporary Scotland through the disaffection of working-class voters towards Labour.

While these three dimensions of conflict have merged as useful entries into the wider unity-division debate, it has also emerged that the distinction between these three levels was seldom so clear-cut. Although most of the chapters have emphasised the intricacies and complexities of such situations, three of them deserve particular notice in this regard. David Evans’s study, for example, built a bridge between the first two levels, showing how the birth of a breakaway union is initially an internal affair, until the break becomes effective and the inner struggle becomes a very public one, between two separate bodies. Fiona Simpkins reconstructed a similar process in the political field with her analysis of Scottish Labour’s emancipation from the Westminster ‘mother firm’. Another illustration of how the three levels mingle to the point of being inextricable is Emmanuelle Avril’s enquiry into the current metamorphosis of the Labour Party. In the fight to expel or maintain Corbyn as the party leader, deciding whether the last word will belong to insiders or outsiders, even distinguishing the former from the latter, is a very complex task. The growing porosity of the boundaries between party and movement today is one more reason, for those who were not convinced yet, to rethink labour politics in the past outside of the usual compartments and straightjackets.

The very recurrence across time of the question of unity and disunity means that the different chapters resonate with each other in ways both unexpected and thought-provoking. If union is desirable, what kind of union should be promoted? In the fight for class independence and social progress, what sort of alliances should be accepted or refused? Be it in the context of an industrialising country or of a ‘post-industrial’ Britain, working-class people and their associations, in their attempts to better the lot of the labouring majority, have repeatedly had to deal with those core issues – as the case studies brought together in this collection aptly illustrate.

The benefits of eclectic pluralism

A word should be added about two sponsors that financially supported the conference at which most of the chapters collected here were initially presented, and about their conception of research. The Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) professes a ‘broad church’ philosophy which has allowed Marxists and non-Marxists to coexist rather peacefully inside it. One ‘school’ could not possibly have found a suitable place in the society, and that was the group formed by the most extreme partisans of the post-modern ‘linguistic turn’, their anti-realist epistemology being ultimately incompatible not only with labour history but with historical enquiry at large. Eclecticism is also a guiding principle of the Labour Movements Groups of the Political Studies Association (PSA), which bring together social historians and political scientists and is still a relative rarity in an academic world where research has tended to be confined to disciplinary silos. Indeed the blending of approaches and methods which lies at the heart of this volume had already been undertaken a decade and a half earlier, in 2001, on the occasion of a conference convened by John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam, also in Manchester, with the objective of *Interpreting the Labour Party* – the title that was given to the book published two years later, with *Approaches to Labour Politics and History* as its subtitle (Callaghan, Fielding and Ludlam, 2003).

As Neville Kirk has insisted, ‘commitment to the cause of labour is not incompatible with historical truth’ (Kirk, 2010: 166), and neither political scientists nor experts in industrial relations should be asked to swear that they are ideologically neutral. This collection, precisely because it is written by people who care about the future of the British labour movement, will hopefully appeal not only to academia, but to the general public. Written in the aftermath of the 2008 worldwide banking crisis, at a moment when the prolonged crisis of global capitalism is re-igniting debate about the need for an alternative and the possible role of workers and their organisations in that mutation, as well as in the immediate wake of the 2016 Brexit vote earthquake which revealed the hidden and often actively ignored fault lines and fractures of British society, this collection’s ambition is, above all, to contribute to defining the terms of these on-going discussions and to set out new avenues for research so as to renew and an expand the field of British labour studies with a view to widening the audience and academic interest in the field.

The authors of the chapters in the present volume are well aware that they are products of their age, human beings engaged, intellectually if not organisationally, in the political fights of the day – and they are happy to admit that the book was not written from an omniscient

perspective, but from a certain window, with all the limits and distortions that this entails. Like the object under study, we stand united and divided. Indeed, coming from different disciplinary horizons, we are segmented methodologically and have accepted ‘eclectic pluralism’ as our only code of conduct. Some of us believe the labour movement cannot go forward unless it breaks with the Labour Party’s national-reformism and adopts an internationalist and revolutionary brand of socialism, others contend that the Labour Party can be rescued and reconquered for the cause of social progress. Some see the trade-unions or the co-operatives as the gateways to a labour renaissance, others place their hopes in ‘new social movements’ such as Occupy the City of London.

Yet, if not by our research methods, if not by our political positioning, we do share two essential ideas that make this book a collective work and not a mere juxtaposition of individual chapters. One is the conviction that class remains relevant as an analytical tool: our focus on groups and factions, on organisational matters, does not undermine that centrality but has allowed us, we hope, to offer an integrated *and* multidisciplinary approach of the labour movement that readers will have found illuminating. When so many have announced that labour studies were ‘in terminal decline or already extinct’, the chapters presented in this volume have testified on the contrary to their ‘capacity for resilience and renewal’ (Kirk, 2010: 162).

The other idea uniting us is the belief the labour movement’s present difficulties are not the end of the road. Though Selina Todd’s recent book *The People. The Rise and Fall of the British Working-Class* stops in 2010 (Todd, 2014), none of us would bet that the Phoenix will never rise again. It may be that an exaggerated perception of the linearity of labour’s ascending movement until the 1950s has led to a parallel overestimation of the irreversibility of its decline since 1980. But the path towards the abolition of exploitation and inequality, or at least towards a fairer society, was always a long and winding road. Remembering past losers and retrieving missed opportunities may therefore be the best way to remind ourselves that the future is unwritten, that another world is possible, because the past too, before it became congealed in the tales of the winners, was once open and unpredictable.

Some may consider that the volume, with its neatly circumscribed British scope, is far too Eurocentric in a phase when labour studies are turning global. Yet we take the view that the questions raised here are far from being strictly British: the Labour Party turmoil is inseparable from the international crisis of social-democracy and the declining membership of trade unions is common to most industrialised nations of Western Europe. If we have not

indulged into comparative or transnational work, this does not mean that such a broad outlook has not informed our inquiries, nor that they cannot be used for such purposes by specialists of labour around the world. As Richard Price explained in his 2010 article for the *Labour History Review*, British labour studies could be given a new lease for life by their post-colonial offshoots (Price, 2010). It is significant that in a search for ‘labour unity’ in the British Library online catalogue, two of the first five hits lead to what was once ‘the British world’: a 2004 issue of the South African Labour Bulletin entitled ‘New Unity for Labour?’, dealing with the uncertain future of the traditional ANC-CP-COSATU alliance and hegemony in the post-Apartheid age, and a 2005 book called *Segmented Labour, United Unions? How Unions in Canada Cope with Increased Diversity*). Soon, the same search will surely point to China and India, those new workshops of the world where the working class has been growing in unprecedented proportions and where the international labour movement will plausibly face its greatest challenges in the years to come. Therefore our interrogations about the unity of labour movements and the legitimacy of labour leaders are echoed on all continents, and British specialists of labour should rejoice in that opening of perspectives.

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