

Book Review: Socialist Register: The Question of Strategy

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*How have the occupations of public squares around the world changed the political scene? And what are the most useful forms of political organization in the new conjuncture? **The Question of Strategy** seeks to answer questions plaguing the left, with contributions from a selection of radical writers and thinkers. Though it aims to challenge and interrogate, this is not a book that will influence political debates because it has disconnected itself from those arguments, concludes **Andrew Crines**.*

Socialist Register: The Question of Strategy. Leo Panitch, Gregory Albo and Vivek Chibber (eds.). Merlin Press. October 2012.

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[The Socialist Register](#) is an alternative organ to [New Left Review](#) which aims to provoke debate and challenge perceptions of the debates taking place on the left. As political circumstances shift, so do the issues under debate. For example, the latest in a long line of journals dating back to 1964 looks at the impact of the Occupy movement, the future of trade unions, Leninism, international socialism, and also an overarching assessment of the state of socialism today. Some of these debates clearly have contemporary relevance, whilst others can be accused of re-fighting long lost battles. In that sense, this volume is designed to both inform and reassure advocates of socialism that the arguments of long lost decades can still be used to understand contemporary politics. It is delightfully romantic and almost self-parodying in arguing “old habits die slowly” (p. 354).

But once the charm has passed, this book presents an interesting view of the left from the embers of the radical tradition. The book attacks social democracy for providing no alternative to austerity, and argues that it was up to other groups such as the Occupy movement to confront capitalism. It promotes the Occupy movement for being “committed to everything Fox News hates – economic and social equality, respect for people of different races, ethnicities, and sexualities, ecologically sound management of our environment” (sic) (p. 53). It presents a strong defence of aims of the Occupy movement, but acknowledges that momentum for continued Occupy groups has been lost because of shifts in the political mood and the falling numbers of activists. In part this was because violence was increasingly being used by occupiers to achieve its aims. Such violence tends to be off-putting for non-violent protesters, yet the book argues that “violence against property can be part of non-violent politics, if it sends a message that is crucial to making a political point” (p. 81).

As well as contemporary issues the book presents a re-treading of Leninism and its relevance today. After the familiar re-examination of Lenin, the book argues that its future rests in the development of New Left parties as alternatives to existing left-leaning social democratic parties. Yet it also points out some flaws with these parties. For example, the book argues that in Britain “the efforts to build alternatives to Labour – the Socialist Alliance and Respect – failed to attract a substantial following among Labour Party members or voters and fell victim to sectarian squabbling” (p. 191). The volume attributes their failure to a lack of extra-parliamentary action and the absence of a militant dimension to their party structures or connection to the working class. This contradicts mainstream modernisation agendas which argue militant tendencies tend to cost votes, and so rather than it being an absence of militancy I would argue it was their non-mainstream character which proved off-putting to the centrist electorate.

The book concludes by asking ‘what is the future of international socialism’? For this section, the book presents a critique of capitalism, arguing “Marx understood that capitalism tends to produce the workers it needs, workers who look upon capitalism as common sense” (p. 346). It underscores this, adding Marx “drew in Capital between a society subordinate to the logic of capital and the logic of a new society” (p. 347). Although an analysis of Marx would be expected in the Socialist Register, its reliance on an outdated conception of Marxism to present the relevance of socialism in the 21st century is problematic because the argument will simply not resonate with those it needs to convince the most – the electorate.

This is not a book that will influence political debates because it has disconnected itself from those arguments. That being the case I would suggest that any reader seeking to pose ‘the question of strategy’ for the left looks elsewhere. Thankfully, such an alternative has materialised in the form of Kevin Hickson and Roy Hattersley’s *The Socialist Way*. This book presents a more grounded argument for socialist renewal.

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