

Feature: 'The Inspiration That Makes for Knowledge': Relaunching the Left Book Club

Formed in 1936 by publisher Victor Gollancz, the **Left Book Club (LBC)** published books on a monthly basis to be read and discussed at groups staged across the UK. Despite reaching a peak membership of 57,000 in 1939 and releasing 257 titles including George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the movement ultimately dwindled by 1948. However, in 2015 **Jan Woolf** and **Neil Faulkner** instigated the relaunch of the Left Book Club in collaboration with Pluto Press. Following the publication of the first title *Syriza: Inside the Labyrinth* by **Kevin Ovenden**, LSE RB managing editor **Rosemary Deller** met with Woolf and Faulkner to discuss the past and present incarnations of the Left Book Club.

'The Inspiration That Makes for Knowledge': Relaunching the Left Book Club

'Since I spend the major part of my life in that state of resentful coma, that in the Universities we call research [...] I want from our movement to come the inspiration that makes for knowledge.'

Harold Laski

Speaking at a rally at the Albert Hall in 1937, the 'movement' to which Laski was referring was the Left Book Club (LBC), a publishing initiative begun by Victor Gollancz one year previously. The purpose of this collective was encapsulated in its name: to publish socialist-minded books on a monthly basis for members to read and then discuss at groups staged across the UK. By its peak in 1939, the LBC could boast of 57,000 members and 1,500 discussion groups in Britain alone, with notable offshoots springing up in Europe, South Africa and Australia as well as in India (in which LBC titles were frequently intercepted due to their overarching anti-imperial stance).



Although the LBC was the brainchild of Gollancz, Laski, Professor at LSE, was a member of his three-person selection committee, with John Strachey making up the trio. Together they chose the monthly books that largely concerned 'the three closely related questions of fascism, the threat of war, and poverty, seeking out effective resistance to the first, the prevention of the second, and socialism as the cure for the third' (John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record*, 14). Of the 257 books published through the LBC, the most famous arguably remains George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, released in 1937. However, in addition to reviewing many of the books for related journal, *Left News*, Laski himself contributed the volume *Faith, Reason and Civilisation* (1944). LSE co-founders Beatrice and Sidney Webb also published with the LBC in 1937.

Through an array of publications that encompassed not only overtly political tracts but also memoirs, novels, plays and poetry by figures such as Arthur Koestler, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Clifford Odets, the LBC sought to generate a collective response to the conditions of the mid-1930s. Emerging at a time of high unemployment in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash, fermenting amidst the turmoils of the Spanish Civil War and established as an attempted bulwark against the possibility of wider impending conflict in the form of World War Two, the LBC forged a sizeable membership that aimed to cut across classes and professions to both educate and agitate.



Image Credit: [generalising](#)

However, the movement didn't last. 1939 marked the high point of its popularity, with membership numbers dwindling to the terminal figure of 7,000 prior to its eventual disbanding in 1948. In his 1970 account of the LBC, former member and author John Lewis suggests that the outbreak of World War Two foreshadowed the LBC's demise as one of its primary goals – the prevention of conflict – had ultimately failed.

This reading can be taken alongside more potent retrospective criticism of the LBC. Some of this has focused on its small selection team, with Gollancz viewed as a controlling editor loathe to depart from a particular ideological line. The publication history of Orwell's *Wigan Pier* is typically cited in this regard, as Gollancz insisted that it was republished in 1938 without Part Two, which contained criticism of some aspects of the socialist movement. Philip Hensher's appraisal of the LBC as '[a compressed statement in the long history of English naïveté](#)' also alludes to the perception that some authors and members served as apologists for Stalinist oppressions in their lauding of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, it is the Webbs who are frequently mentioned due to their tome, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation* (albeit originally published with a question mark at the end of the title).

However, to condemn the LBC as either naïve or a failure is to ignore the extent to which many of its members and authors – including Clement Attlee, Ellen Wilkinson and Strachey – were in government by 1945. While there were tensions between the Labour Party and the LBC during the latter's existence, it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest some degree of symbiotic link between the intellectual output and leanings of the LBC and the forging of the post-war consensus, or what we might call, drawing upon the title of Ken Loach's 2013 film, 'The Spirit of '45'.

Is the LBC nonetheless a nostalgia-inflected object of its time, its relevance largely neutralised to [the pleasure of ferreting out one of the iconic orange hardbacks in a secondhand bookshop](#) or visiting archives housed in such places as Glasgow and Sheffield Universities? Certainly not, according to the figures behind its 2015 revival. [The relaunch of the LBC](#) has been initiated by writer and journalist Jan Woolf and the historian Neil Faulkner. Known to one another through their involvement in the peace group, *No Glory in War*, the idea of reincarnating the LBC was sparked during an archaeological dig in Jordan. Once both had returned to London, a meeting above a pub resulted in the formation of a team able to turn the theoretical promise of a relaunch into praxis, including other key players such as Anna Minton (author of [Ground Control](#)), Housmans Bookshop and Pluto Press.

After less than one year, the first LBC volume was published in November 2015, chosen through a democratic

process by the nine-member committee. Kevin Ovenden's *Syriza* – [reviewed on LSE RB by Nicolas Schneider](#) – offers an immersive insight into Syriza's electoral victory amidst the Greek debt crisis. This book is to be followed by [quarterly publications](#) that similarly respond to the most urgent issues of the day, including Ken Livingstone's forthcoming reflections on the future of the Labour Party (*Being Red*), Samir Jeraj and Rosie Walker's analysis of the housing crisis and resultant 'rent trap' and Jeremy Seabrook's engagement with those experiencing the sharpest end of austerity through the withdrawal of state support in *Cut Out: Living Without Welfare*.

While *Syriza*'s bright orange spine plays deliberate homage to the iconic look of the original LBC publications, Woolf and Faulkner stress that the revived LBC is not a backward-looking exercise. Just as Strachey declared that the 1930s incarnation of the LBC 'could only have happened at the present moment, in the present situation in the world' (Lewis 15), Woolf explains that a desire and need to forge a sense of 'clarity' in response to the conditions of the moment are key to the LBC's re-emergence in 2015.

What the striking design of *Syriza* also intends to present is a palpable rallying object to challenge the perception that contemporary political change is primarily conducted through the medium of screen technologies. Actively tying the LBC to the on-the-ground mobilisation recently dubbed the 'Corbyn Effect', the purpose of these books is to serve as a physical focal point for further engagement, discussions and face-to-face encounters that cut across the divides that have frequently characterised the Left. While online networks will undoubtedly prove essential to the LBC's desire to generate momentum across the UK and beyond, its overarching role is to contribute to the attempt 'to overcome atomisation by bringing people together to discuss ideas, learn about choices and act collectively'. As Faulkner elaborates:

'I can see the LBC in that framework – choosing the right books at the right moment, encouraging people to read them at the same time, and then coming together to debate the issues. That is why the new LBC will stand or fall on the reading groups. And I think the reading groups will only really work in the context of a rising mass movement.'

Rosemary Deller is the Managing Editor of *LSE Review of Books*.

This article gives the views of the author and the interviewees, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog as an entity, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books