



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 02 No. 03. Oct-Dec 2024. Page#80-85

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21914140>

Comparing the New Left: American and Western European Radical Movements, 1955—1975 from the Lens of World History

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the novel theme of the rise of New Leftism in the West, particularly during its most eventful decades. It seeks to explore this theme as a topic of World History. There are three distinct aspects of this study that justify its rationale as a theme of World History, viz. The first, usually the rise of the New Leftist movement during the 1950s, is seen as an isolated phenomenon specific to different national contexts. It has usually been shot through perspectives underpinned by discontinuities and disharmonies. Moreover, the elusiveness of the definition of New Left makes it further problematic to make the implicit commonalities more explicit. But this article seeks to assess the impact of these two standards of New Leftism upon each other. Second, the apparent research gap concerning the comparative dimensions of this area, even in the vast stock of literature on this theme, has induced the author of the piece to explore this theme in this article. Third, this theme has not been explored as an area of World History, even though the phenomenon of Leftism has been an inspiring moral project endowed with both elements' harmonization with national specificities as well as transcendental elements. Moreover, the international aspect of the New Leftist movement, by and large, remains unexplored. This article is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the definition of the New Left. Moreover, it brings to the fore certain common factors which were instrumental in the rise of the New Leftist movements across both sides of the Atlantic. Besides, by focusing on these themes, it further highlights the main postulates of the New Leftist movement's agenda. "The second section deals with comparative themes. It situates these movements within different trajectories of the social landscape, offering a detailed comparison across more than ten distinct areas. The third section explores the impact of New Leftism on World History, highlighting how this theme can enrich the field. The second section deals with comparative themes. Besides, situating these movements in different trajectories of the social maps. It makes detailed comparisons of these movements by isolating more than ten areas. The third section seeks to explore the impact of New Leftism on World History. Its further highlights in what ways this theme could be instrumental in enriching the subject matter of World History.

Keywords: New left, Radical Movements, Isolated, Harmonization, Comparative Theme.

Modeling Framework and Strategy

Drawing upon the insights from Patrick Manning, this study utilizes his modeling framework to analyze three crucial aspects of "movements of the left, in the United States of America (henceforth America) and Europe comparison, fusion, and connectivity. Before unpacking the debate, it would be relevant to quote Patrick Manning to underscore his usage of the concepts. Manning defines comparison as an attempt to bring "two or more things together... and examine them systematically, identifying similarities and differences among them (Manning, 2003, p. 279). He goes on to suggest that the unit under comparison should be seen as part of a larger system (Manning, 2003, p. 280). He further refers to a more specific meaning of

comparison, where the units are in physical contact with each other. However, he emphasizes that it can function as “two units isolated from each other” in a limited sense (Manning, 2003). Furthermore, he draws a distinction between micro and macro comparison (Manning, 2003, pp. 281–282). This framework is used in the second section of this article.

Broadly speaking, Patrick Manning’s work contains various frameworks that could be used as modeling strategies for undertaking research projects, such as “connection, interaction, linkage, diffusion, syncretism, fusion, etc.” However, this study focuses on fusion in view of its greater relevance for my article. He defines fusion as “(if) pre-existing and new ideas or (two sets of ideas) bring sufficient inspiration, they might fuse into new cultural creation”. (Manning, 2003) Furthermore, I borrow the concept of ‘influences’ from Manning’s work. These influences may take several forms, including one-way diffusion from one geographical region to another or from one locality to another. The other form may be a two-way affair, and the third form is more complex because influence transforms as it transfers from one society to another. These complex interactions can produce entirely new forces or phenomena (Manning, 2003). This study employs this framework in its third section, which focuses on impact.

The following section focuses on the definition of the New Left, the origins of the term, common factors affecting the rise of New Leftist movements in both Western Europe and America, and the main postulates of New Leftist agendas.

How to Define New Left

New Left, or New Leftism, is a generic term that dates to the late 1950s. In one sense, it is a political tendency rather than an organization. It signifies diverse challenges to the doctrines, methods of organization, and style of leadership of the “Old Left” (Bealey, n.d., p. 223). The other definition describes it as a loose group of the above-mentioned elements originally formed by former members of Western Communist parties. (Docherty, 1997, pp. 182–183) Another useful way to define the New Left is through its contrast with the Old Left the latter being characterized by its rigid adherence to Moscow’s interpretation of Marxism (Docherty, 1997, p. 183). Lin Chun, the author of the work *The British New Left*, defines it in terms of an essentially intellectual exercise in Marxist theory (Chun, 1993, as cited in Thompson, 1996, p. 94). In his history of Socialism, Donald Sassoon frames this movement’s evolution as a series of strategic readjustments, which he categorizes as revisionism (Eley, 1998; Sassoon, 1996).

The definitions mentioned above primarily focused on the European perspectives of the New Left. It is relevant to look at the definitions of American historians and New Left activists. One can divide their definitions into three categories, viz., narrow, loose, and broad.

A narrow definition of New Left comes from intellectuals such as Todd Gitlin and James Miller who define it in term of a “small clique based in the national office of students for a Democratic Society”.(Hunt, 1984, p. 141) John Mcmillian provides a more exclusionist definition by describing it “as a loosely organized, mostly white student movement”, while referring to its origin and subsequent transformation he contends that “it first began to crystallize in the early 1960s and then picked up steam towards the middle of the decade, following the Free Speech Movement and the escalating us invasion of Vietnam, only to dwindle away in the early 1970s”.(McMillian, 1984, pp. 5–6) In a loose fashion, it may be defined as “a much larger constellation of social protest activity that either grew out of the New Left ... or influenced and inspired the New Left”.(McMillian, 1984, p. 6) Van Gosse, a distinguished historian of the New Left in America, contextualizes it in a much broader connotation, viewing it as “the combination of all these movements from civil rights in the 1950s to gay and women’s rights in the 1970s.”(Gosse, 2005a, p. 1) In his other work *Rethinking New Left*, he concurs that “Taken together, these movements represent the essence of those years we call somewhat

inaccurately, “the 1960s” and because each sought to overturn existing structures of racial, gender and economic privilege in favour of a radical vision of equality and democracy, they are defined as a movement of the left”.(Gosse, 2005b, p. 4) He further elaborates it by arguing that “collectively, they called themselves the New Left to underline their separation from the Old Left of the century’s first half based in the labour movement and focused on the struggle of workers against capitalists”.(Gosse, 2005b) While conceptualizing it in its broadest sense, he defines it as “the New Left in the late 1960s was a pluralist ‘movement of movements’. While defining it in more inclusive terms, he puts it as “encompassing all of the struggle for fundamental change from the early 1950s roughly to 1975 ”.(Gosse, 2005b, p. 5)¹

The Origin of the Term New Left

There are two misnomers about the earliest usage of this term. The most commonly held view of the origins of this term is that “the first use of the term is attributed to the foundation of the New Left Review by former communist intellectuals such as Edward P. Thompson and Raymond Williams”.(Docherty, 1997, p. 182) It is also said that US sociologist C. Wright Williams popularized it in the US by writing “Letter to the New Left” in New Left Review.(Chun, 1993, as cited in Thompson, 1996, p. 97) However, Lin Chun is of the view that the term ‘New Left’ was taken from France, where it was more widely used.(Thompson, 1996, p. 97) Dorothy Thompson, the widow of E.P. Thompson, also endorses this; she maintains that “in France the Party of New Left named “the Partid’ Union de la Gauche Socialiste ‘... was founded to offer a more structured alternative to the old parties”.(Thompson, 1996, p. 97) While referring to one of its founding resolutions, she contends that “it aimed to found a united socialist party” comprising “all militants, Marxist and non-Marxist, Christian and Atheists” who were “determined to fight unfalteringly for the revolutionary transformation of society”.

Factors Influencing Both Strands of New Leftist Movement

The disintegration of the Soviet hegemony over the International Communist Movement after 1956 may be described as the first and foremost reason for the rise of new Leftist movements, as it came to be challenged by Trotskyist and Maoist parties, which subsequently led to the loosening of Soviet ideological control.(Bealey, n.d., p. 223) Similarly, new ideological debates critiquing Marxist revolutionary doctrines of class and revolution caused a sort of disillusionment with the conception of revolutionary totalism. These debates focused on the irrelevance of revolutionary class in the context of the different socio-political milieu of the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe and particularly the USA. Moreover, the East European Revolutions and Soviet response caused further disillusionment among the members of Western Communist Parties, and these factors opened the floodgates of resignations and defections even among some of the very ardent supporters of the Communist Movement. For instance, E.P. Thompson and a group of British historians resigned from the British Communist Party in reaction against Soviet suppression of the uprising in Hungary. (Docherty, 1997, p. 182) The Cuban revolution of 1959 and anti-colonial struggle in Africa and Asia further showed that “there were different strategies for revolution and other groups apart from the industrial proletariat could be agents of revolutionary change”. (Bealey, n.d., p. 223) Another set of factors attributed to the rise of the New Left may be ascribed to the role of intellectual debates over the interpretation of Marxism, which brought out the more humane side of Marxism. For instance, the publication of a complete translation of Marx’s Economic and Political

For further details see Van Goose “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left in Roy Rosen Weign and Jean-Christopher Agnew, eds., A Companion to Post-1945 America (London Black Well 2002), PP.277-302

Manuscripts of 1844 in 1963 points towards this aspect. (Docherty, 1997, p. 182) These were interpreted as stressing the need for social commitment. While alluding to this aspect, Marxist historian Geoff Eley maintains that “a powerful current of socialist humanism inspired by the readings of Marx’s early philosophical writings of the 1840s led to the shift in the focus of debate towards “freedom” and “alienation”. (Eley, 2007, p. 18) Though in the later stages there were divisive fallouts on Western Marxism on the issue of this “epistemological break”. (Eley, 2007) However, for a brief period “the concurrence was far greater than the impending divisiveness”. (Eley, 2007)

Core Postulates of the American and Western European New Left

American New Left endeavored to reform American society through direct action. (Meyers, 1989, p. 4) It pursued “single issue. (Gosse, 2005b, p. 189) It further strived to establish what Flacks described as “liberal- labour-left-coalition”. (Flacks, 1989, p. 140) The most conspicuous element of its agenda may be described as the notion of participatory democracy. (Flacks, 1989, p. 143) Through which people were encouraged to take part in decisions that shape their lives (Frost, n.d., p. 95). Paul Buhl, a prominent historian of the American New Left, explicates it in terms of an advance beyond parliamentary democracy. (Buhle, 1990, p. 517) The notion of controlling the “decisions that affect our lives” may also be described as another conspicuous theme of Agenda of American Left. (Flacks, 1989, p. 138) The New Leftist agenda found its most conspicuous illustration in the port Hourn statements which was drafted by Hayden. This was later hailed as the agenda of the generations. It also revolved round the theme of participatory democracy. (Gosse, 2005a, p. 12) American New Left also tried to locate the sources of social insurgency outside the working class, which signifies a point of departure from traditional left. Overall, the American New Leftist movement eschewed politics as it, by and large, continued to pursue a societal reform-centered agenda through single issues. However, this movement gravitated towards more radical directions on account of a series of events. (Flacks, 1989, p. 138) Therefore, the document theorist of its agenda remained issue-centered, which only gave way to larger and larger movements episodically. (Gosse, 2005b, p. 189)

New Left had to face threefold challenges while pursuing these goals; these came in the form of the politics of welfare-state liberalism, the Cold War, and anti communist crude opinions, Flacks noted, to which the New Left responded through the efforts “to create alternatives both to traditional Left and to the dominant force in the democratic party”. (Flacks, 1989, p. 138) While referring to the common thread of its agenda, Van Goose identifies three conspicuous trajectories: (a) rejection of Cold War liberalism; (b) resistance against white supremacy; and (c) popular mobilization against the US imperialist agenda. (Gosse, 2005b, p. 189)

One may isolate the aspects of the agenda of the New Leftist movement in Western Europe. (a) Reformed capitalism; (b) more representative democracy animated by pro-labor socialist vision with more emphasis on trade unionism; (c) support to Atlanticist international order; (d) desire to maintain international peace; and (e) abolition of all forms of economic inequality between the sexes. The first three points were well complementary to each other, whereas the latter two also fitted well into the vision of the liberal welfare-oriented social democracy raised upon reformed capitalism. The adherence of the logic of reformed capitalism entailed broader connotation of both compromise readjustment with in the prevailing international capitalist system as well as realization with the indispensability of capitalism for maintenance and perpetuation of welfare state. Moreover, the urge for reformed capitalism was also actuated by the motive of making the former compatible with the requirements of the welfare state. By the 1950s, the hegemony had been registered in various ways, and the Leftist Parties also came to realize the realities of Pax Americana. This went a long way towards structuring the options

as well as responses of these parties. Therefore, instead of going for destruction and dethronement of the capitalist order, these parties accorded priority to making capitalism more humane.(Eley, 1998, p. 102) Therefore, “they defended the growth model of Western capitalism, which provided sought-after consumer goods and necessary surplus with which to play for the welfare state, peace, and the reform of the state”.(Sassoon, 1969, p. 196) While further explicating this point, Eley concurs that “In practice, this meant an incomes policy to guarantee ‘social peace’ focused on centralized wage bargaining and a corporatist system of social partnership, triangulated through the national negotiations of employers, trade unionism and the state”.(Eley, 1998, p. 103)²

Similarly, the realities of the prevailing international order left them with very few choices but to support the Atlantic Alliance. Therefore, instead of “seeking a viable socialist foreign policy, they followed a ‘national’ or consensual line key to the Atlantic Alliance”.(Eley, 1998, p. 102) Though there were some voices within the New Left espousing the “concept of a non-aligned European movement which would work out socialist policies independently of superpower influence and control”.(Thompson, 1996, p. 94) But the advocates of such a vision could not take a single ideological position on account of their failure to agree upon a consensual definition of Socialism.(Thompson, 1996, p. 94) Therefore, “Neutralism remained confined to socialist parties of neutral countries such as Austria, Finland and Sweden and the options of pacifism and solidarity with the third world struggles over decolonization were pursued by minority factions rarely linked to wider support in their national movements”.(Thompson, 1996, p. 94) The pursuit of this agenda had deep implications. On the economic front, the acknowledgment of the inevitability of the market called for “only their commitment to social protection under a drastically reduced version of the welfare state”.(Sassoon, 1996, p. 754) At the political level, it implied abandoning “radical perspectives from their agenda”.(Sassoon, 1996, p. 197) Which further meant that they could “think of social improvement without the risks and burdens of revolutionary struggle”.(Eley, 1998, p. 103) Sassoon very aptly epitomizes the overall implications of this situation by arguing that it “engendered a deep conservatism in the socialist parties, which became trapped in the defense of generalized status quo”.(Sassoon, 1969, p. 196)

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