Rethinking the Left in Victory and Defeat: Introduction

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The collapse of neoliberalism since September and October of 2008 has been sudden and spectacular. The failure of the ideas sustaining the Washington Consensus and the practices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund seems nearly complete. The new world we may be entering could have a dramatically different political opportunity structure than the old one. But what will take its place? What has the Left to offer? What has it learned in recent decades that have been filled with more defeats than victories? What will it have to offer *right now* when millions are seeking solutions? Our contributors possess no crystal ball. Our answers to these questions are framed historically. How have left movements learned from defeat in the past? What factors have enabled them to exploit moments of opportunity? Analyzing the immediate historical context to the present crisis, historians can suggest which measures promise the most hope of success and which seem doomed to failure. To this end, the papers in this collection concern themselves with left victory and defeat. They show that victory and defeat are more problematic than we might think. Each raises its own particular set of challenges and concerns.

Which takes a higher toll on left-wing political cohesion, victory or defeat? It is a question worth considering. What can we learn from examining and comparing victory and defeat? In answering this question, the collection in this issue makes four points. First, both victory and defeat force a reconsideration of routine practices but in different ways. Second, victory and defeat, although they are opposites, may be asymmetric with respect to outcomes. Defeat may be, although usually it is not, irretrievable and irreversible but victory is always relative, partial, and incomplete. Third, today victory and defeat both seem to be pushing left movements toward taking to the streets in their local communities. Finally, confronting threats of capitalist globalization, new transnational social movements are emerging based on world-wide regulation and international mobilization but genuine reform is liable to depend on action by a mix of new movements and old established institutions.

Let us look at each of these points separately.

Victory involves a transition from everyday practice to positions of power. It requires immediate decisions about governance—which policies merit action and which do not? Electoral victory demands resources that must already be available in the field. These resources can include widely accepted political programs, solid organization, shared values, and skilled political strategists and tacticians. Defeat provides more leeway for fundamental reconsideration and debate as well as for far-fetched theorizing.

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Defeat may have its uses. Deep discontent may open the way for radical approaches that would be summarily dismissed in a sunnier climate. Exclusion from the corridors of power allows time to reconsider fundamentals. Alexandra Sippel shows us a revision of fundamental positions within a French socialist movement that has suffered three successive electoral losses. Today, some French socialists have adopted a policy of *décroissance* (ungrowth). The movement for *décroissance* urges prosperous Westerners to live frugally, to value both leisure and work for their own sake, to reduce our needs, and to share our wealth with the hungry peoples of the world.

French advocates of *décroissance* have reached far back into the collectivist tradition to find their remedies for contemporary problems. Since the 1830s a common program of the modern labor Left has held the field, a program shaped by Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Karl Marx, Robert Owen, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Jean de Sismondi. All stressed the two-fold character of capitalism. First, enhanced trade, a more complex division of labor, and accumulating technology were promoting unprecedented economic growth and providing the economic bases for a life of abundance for all. Second, despite their awesome potential, these new economic forces were increasing social inequality and worsening the conditions of the working classes. The task of socialist policy, early nineteenth century socialists argued, was to use heightened productivity to redistribute wealth, to raise the living standards of the masses, and to promote social equality.

In contrast, the contemporary French socialists that Sippel studies, such as Serge Latouche and Hubert Védrine, believe that economic growth and technological advance have generally exhausted their potential for solving social problems. In Europe and North America, we have enough stuff; indeed we have more than enough stuff. If we continue to produce more, we risk exhausting water supplies and arable land.[1] What we need is a fairer redistribution of resources, both within Europe and North America and between Europe and North America and the rest of the world.

The stress on "the less, the better" is foreign to modern socialist thought although, as Sippel demonstrates, it had firm foundations in the Enlightenment tradition. Still there were always elements in the socialist critique that pointed in this direction. Socialists never celebrated the unending multiplication of commodities associated with profit-driven capitalism.

Could such views win popular acceptance? Can, for example, a European working class that discovered mass consumerism fifty years ago really want to abandon it?[2] Could it abandon consumerism, even if it wanted to? In an age of universal commodification, people lack both the means and the knowledge of how to live simply. Nothing is gained by romanticizing the life of hardscrabble farmers on the unproductive, unrewarding land of Appalachian America; there is a difference between living sparely and living miserably. We need to consider what measures are required to enable people to live simply, if they are so inclined.

Rooted in environmentalism, *décroissance* addresses some important modern European economic and social realities. Today in most of Europe,

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fertility is falling below replacement rates, Europeans are emigrating from rust belts as well as from marginal agricultural regions.[3] Some European political leaders, frightened by the prospect of population decline, regional stagnation, and economic slowdown, search for ways to stimulate fertility. But advocates of *décroissance* see such decline as an opportunity to spread a new perspective that argues that many modern Europeans—although far from all—have quite enough to get by and need to learn to get by with what they have. While *décroissance* may lack contemporary mass appeal, it may be time to put on the table an idea that sooner or later must be confronted.

In contrast to Sippel's study of policy formation within a French socialist party in defeat, Lucian M. Ashworth shows us policy formulation in a rapidly expanding British Labour Party. Until the First World War, Labour had been entirely focused on domestic issues. Founded only in 1900, the party would become the senior partner in a governing coalition by 1924. The First World War led many Labour leaders to realize the inadequacy of the knee-jerk pacifism that had hitherto prevailed and the need for a foreign policy that might help it respond to new and unfamiliar situations.[4] The establishment of the Advisory Committee on International Questions (ACIntQ) served as a conduit for Liberal journalists and academics to influence Labour politicians. And the need for such influence was urgent. Although the first Labour government did not last the year, it revealed the growing electoral strength of Labour and the fracturing of the Liberal Party, divided by David Lloyd George's coalition with the Conservatives during the First World War and split by factionalism in the postwar period.

Unlike Sippel's French socialists, British Labour did not undergo an extended internal debate to hash out new policies, for Labour did not have the time for such ruminating. Pressed for a foreign policy to deal with institutions such as the League of Nations, Labour went out and procured for itself an entire school of policy planners. Through the ACIntQ, Labour leaders went to school with academics who established the field of International Relations in the university curriculum, as well as some important journalists. The divisions and debates among these figures about the League of Nations and Britain's relationship to it shaped Labour foreign policy throughout the 1920s. In power or near to power, Labour leaders turned to existing networks of thinkers, drawing upon networks of Liberal intellectuals estranged from their party.

Victory always involves a trade-off of potential changes against actual accomplishments. In evaluating victory, it is always necessary to contrast programmatic accomplishment with programmatic failure. In perspective, many so-called victories may be seen as at least partial defeats. Defeat, too, may involve balancing gains and losses and knowing when to retreat as well as when to advance, but it may also involve the total elimination of a combative labor force. Technological change and changing forms of work organization can wipe once conflictual relationships from the political map by eliminating contenders.

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Tara Martin's essay examines the British Winter of Discontent of 1978–1979. This was a period of intense strike militancy, alleged to have produced a backlash that brought the Conservative Margaret Thatcher to power. From Martin's perspective, the defeat of trade unionism in the aftermath of the strike wave represents only a retreat in Labour's long struggle. The feminization of the Labour movement that occurred during this period—the integration of women into the institutional structures in trade unions—will endure. It offers the promise of wider appeals and greater social justice in the future.

In the end, Martin argues that these mass strikes transformed and reinvigorated British Labour. More importantly, they resulted in the institutionalization of places for women within trade-union organizations. The predominantly female service industries played a large role in this strike wave. Grassroots women activists were particularly important within these industries; many had been influenced by the women's movement. As the strike wave of 1978–1979 grew, women played more prominent roles as shop stewards, on strike committees, and ultimately as union officials; women activists proved ever more important in crafting demands that rallied women workers to the union.

The story that Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson tell of 1984 Britain is one of defeat unalloyed. Yet the nature of this defeat tells us much about the changing nature of the labor movement and the prospects for future victories and defeats. In 1911 the miners constituted one of the largest components of the British industrial working class, over 1.2 million workers. By 1984, before the strike, the number of miners had declined to around two hundred thousand. The mining labor force was finally eliminated almost entirely by a Conservative government anxious to settle scores with the miners who had brought down the Conservative Heath government in 1974. Although the soaring price of oil at the present time is sparking a modest revival of British mining, the defeat of the 1984 miners' strike witnessed the closing down of many mines and the near liquidation of the miners as an occupational group.[5] From this terrible defeat lessons can be learned. The strike revealed the inadequacy of the traditional mining community to defend its members faced with a sustained government offensive in a post-industrial economy. In its moment of greatest need, the mining community was unable to mobilize fully its supporters within the community and outside it.

Right from the start of this life-or-death struggle, both outsiders and insiders emphasized the role of the mining "community" in responding to threats of mine closure. At the beginning of the strike, community usually referred to the constellation of male work, family, and locality that gave miners a distinctive social identity.[6] Many outside students of collective action lauded this sense of unitary identity as imparting a particular strength to miners' solidarity.

The mining communities of the 1980s proved unable to withstand a sustained government offensive. Previous waves of pit closings had led to commercial diversification in many communities, weakening the tight-knit solidarities of an earlier age. Organizations of miners' wives developed but were often not as effective as they might have been. If community may generate internal warmth,

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communities so tightly built on work and personal friendship could also be exclusionary. Associations of strike supporters were sometimes too "self defensive and inward looking" to welcome outsiders freely. When speaking outside the mining community, miners' wives sometimes revealed themselves as extremely articulate advocates of the miners' struggle, but returning home, they were consigned to the kitchen.

Modern social movements, such as those described by Martin or, as we shall see directly, by Ran Greenstein and Alexandre Fortes, are often rooted in communities but these are politicized communities sharing long-standing political goals. The British miners' taken-for-granted association with Labour did not enable the mining community to make the best use of those forces at its disposal, either internally or externally. Modern politicized communities seek to reach out actively to larger communities. For all these reasons they have proven successful in mobilizing constituents and sympathizers than did the coal communities in their hour of need.

If both victory and defeat are complex categories, today victory and defeat both seem to be pushing left movements in the direction of a social movement unionism based on concepts of citizenship and universal rights. At various points in time, large bureaucratic unions, solidary natural communities, and small Marxist activist groups, known as groupuscules, presented models of union organization. In the recent period they have not fared well. If we discard these models, what remains to us? Recent experience offers some rich alternatives. A survey of many different contexts suggests that social movements based in communities and active in the streets seem to provide real hope for the future. These movements are democratic and participatory and frequently reach out to other communities including women, people of color, gays, and migrants to obtain common, usually civic, goals.

Demands for rights and full citizenship are often at the center of these struggles. Paul Johnson argues that where citizenship is defined as a "relationship to public institutions. . . .labor is a 'citizenship movement.' " He also contends that "labor movements converge with other citizenship movements that seek to develop public institutions that defend and rebuild local communities in an increasingly globalized public order."[7]

The role of social movement unionism seems to be spreading on a world scale. In fact, a symbiosis seems to be occurring. In the most diverse situations, a rhetoric of citizenship, universal rights, and democracy is replacing a rhetoric of narrow self-interest, traditional loyalty, and class struggle. Labor organizations are becoming social movements, absorbing social movements, or collaborating with social movements on an ever greater scale. The variety and complexity of these interrelationships needs further study.[8] The Israeli/Palestinian Left, as analyzed by Ran Greenstein, illustrates the path by which a left-wing party, almost a groupuscule, with roots in the labor movement dissolved into a variety of social movements, many of which are only peripherally connected to labor.

Greenstein presents a picture of left-wing defeat in Israel/Palestine caused by failure in appealing to an important working-class constituency and by failure

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in the foreign policy sphere on which the party had staked much. For much of the twentieth century, Israeli/Palestinian left-wing politics shared many similarities with the European left. The Israeli/Palestinian left was divided into liberal humanists and a socialist left. In the 1960s an unusually large array of far-left groupuscules emerged on the edges of mainstream politics. Anti-Zionist and bi-national solutions emerged at a time when Arab nationalism, some of it anti-Jewish in character, grew. After the 1967 war, a new left organization emerged: the Israeli Socialist Organization (Matzpen), which advocated the de-Zionization of Israel and its integration in a socialist Middle East.

The great crisis of the Israeli left occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Internationally, the Camp David accords won new recognition for Israel in the Middle East, and the PLO's recognition of Israel gave new plausibility to Zionism. At the same time, a key labor constituency, the Oriental Jews, who seemed to be moving left in the 1960s began, in the late 1970s, to enroll and vote for the extreme right. The rightward movement of the most proletarianized section of the Israeli working class was a dramatic defeat for the labor Left, one from which it never recovered.

In the case of the Israeli Left, defeated activists sought alternatives. Today, the left-wing groupuscules and Matzpen have both vanished; the Israeli Left is dominated by ad hoc movements with appeals not to class solidarity but to democracy, justice, equality, and civil rights. Among other demands, leftists seek equal citizenship for all, new immigration policies, full extension of citizenship to Russian and Ethiopian Jews, and equality of cultural expression, education, and employment. They join ad hoc organizations like the Committee against House Demolitions, the Committee against Torture, and Physicians for Human Rights. Greenstein sees these movements as the future of the Left and as part of an Israeli movement toward radical democracy, the kind advocated by social theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.[9]

Radical democracy and citizenship are certainly watchwords of the new Brazilian labor movement; no group has more publicly identified itself with democratic social movements and absorbed them into its party structure than has the Brazilian Workers' Party. Many in the leadership of the Brazilian Workers' Party, described by Alexandre Fortes, have also abandoned traditional images of socialism to stress democratic unity and citizenship.

In the Brazilian case presented by Fortes, defeat and victory are intricately related. On January 23, 2002, when the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) swept to electoral victory, its leader, Luis Ignácio da Silva, universally known as "Lula," announced to a huge crowd and thunderous applause that his administration would not move "one comma" from its socialist ideals.[10] In fact, the government did not enact any of the basic reforms advocated by socialists. At the national level, its commitment to reform for the most downtrodden groups, justified in the name of citizenship, has helped to retain the loyalty of the rank and file. At the local level, the reformist elements of the PT have been strongest. In such cities as Porto Alegre, the party's strength has been its appeal to

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transparency, local-level decision making, and democratization. Such communities may yet demand a more militant agenda for the PT, although Fortes fears the disruptive potential of such actions. At the national level, the great strength of the PT has been its ability to bring the Left together to support Brazilian democracy, to assemble ad hoc coalitions of social and political movements, and to defend and improve the position of groups particularly adversely affected by market forces.

At one time, the PT would have been widely denounced as opportunist, but the PT's actions occur in an environment in which many PT leaders have abandoned their faith in the command economy, market socialism, and even Scandinavian-style welfare states. The true importance of the PT is less in its socialist credentials than in its democratic ideals and its ability to unite around themes of citizenship and universal rights. Fortes concludes with the hope that in the "Lula age," Brazil will "effectively transform itself into a fairer and more promising society in this new century."

Drawing on material from his recent important study of labor protest, Gerald Friedman also presents dramatic examples of both socialist victory and defeat.[11] After surveying strike figures and union membership in Europe, North America, and Japan, Friedman argues that the modern labor movement in the advanced industrial world is dying, the victim of a "materialist" creed that emphasizes the worker's individual interest rather than the collectivist goals that inspired workers in the past.

Friedman argues that historically the trade union movement and the labor left have grown by enormous leaps when new groups suddenly went on strike and, subsequently, joined unions. The issues behind these large-scale leaps, he claims, were never simply self-interest but always were combined with larger political struggles or more encompassing trade union demands. Battles over democracy, control of production, and labor rights were fundamental to these struggles. Once ensconced in power, labor unions have lost sight of their radical movement origins and become comfortable bureaucracies.

Essentially Friedman argues that in their inception and period of greatest growth, European and American unionists have turned to social movement organizations. From his analysis of strike figures and union rhetoric Friedman discerns the existence of social movement unionism in the United States and Europe of the 1870s and 1880s. Friedman's program for trade union revival involves studying labor's past and learning from its examples. Friedman shows how past strike victories, by turning mass activism into bureaucratic proceduralism, created the conditions for contemporary defeats.

The studies by Greenstein, Portes, and Friedman in this collection all document the central role of modern social movements in organizing demonstrations, supporting strikes, and mobilizing masses. The ultimate test of these movements' efficacy may be their success in confronting globalization and world-wide economic crisis. To what extent can social movements and social movement unions, usually originating at the local or national level, succeed in confronting capital, increasingly operating at the international level? Today

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globalization is transforming social conflicts. The internet, cell phone, and communication satellite as well as the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF all affect the ends and means of popular mobilization. The opportunities for using new communications technologies to confront internationally-organized capitalism is exciting and important but a single-minded concentration on such efforts in their full transnational extension can lead to the neglect of other vital components of international mobilization and of the historical context for cross-border struggles. Rethinking the left not only entails identifying and evaluating new and innovative strategies but it also involves recognizing what remains vital in the old and considering how old and new should relate to one another.

As the review essay by John French and Kristin Wintersteen shows, over the last decades, social movements' responses to globalization have increasingly shifted focus. In the 1920s and 1930s, urged on by the International Labor Organization (ILO), reformers used appeals to national self interest to establish ILO approved labor standards and worker rights in individual countries. Today many activists champion the use of universalist discourses to appeal to global audiences. Social movements based in North America and Europe launch consumer boycotts of brand name commodities in their home markets aiming at exploitative sub-contractors in the Caribbean and south Asia. In such cases, states may seem almost irrelevant. In other instances states clearly retain some significance, as when activists seek to give privileged access to American and European markets to countries meeting international labor standards. Even here, transnational social movements usually monitor compliance through non-state organizations, such as the ILO or professedly independent NGO investigators.

French and Wintersteen recognize that the new transnational social movements employ innovative tactics to mobilize large numbers of European and American consumers, but they also insist that we should not underestimate elements of continuity between earlier struggles for labor standards and recent ones. Social movements, social movement unionism, legislative action, and labor solidarity can all play important roles in cross-border struggles. Transnational social movements inescapably originate within a national context and to understand their roots we must recognize the forces already promoting internationalism at national and local levels.

Two points should be made about how the forces of internationalism emerge and grow. First, as French and Wintersteen show, in struggles over globalization, the continuing role of national trade unions and left political parties in Europe and North America must be acknowledged.[12] Take the case of seafarers' wages and working conditions, as studied by Nathan Lillie and discussed in this review essay. Today minimum wages and a degree of protection for working conditions have been extended to many workers in maritime commerce, workers seemingly outside the jurisdiction of trade unions and consolidated states. The secret of this transnational activity lies in conscientious enforcement of national-level regulations and local-level labor solidarity as well as on local social movement unions. Building on older conceptions of

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worker identity and worker rights, solidary unions and dutiful government inspectors in a few key ports can slow down the loading of ships that do not observe labor codes. In a maritime world where quick turnaround has become everything, the risk of slowdowns makes it economical for shipowners to observe internationally-set minimum standards. Working together, port inspectors and both nationalist and international trade unions have provided significant protection for seafarers.

A second element that links past and modern social movements as well as social movement unions is that of monitoring. Transnational social movements may win promises to implement fair labor standards but movements based in foreign countries are poorly equipped for a task that requires intimate knowledge of localities. As Gay Seidman argues in her book cited in this essay, the best monitors are almost always indigenous trade unionists or knowledgeable and honest state inspectors.[13] Also, there is little sense in offering poor nations the carrot of improved trade relations in exchange for laws prohibiting child labor, if states lack not only the will but the capacity to enforce such laws. For this reason the struggle against sweating on an international scale almost necessarily involves a battle to create the possibilities for successful monitoring the creation of democracies with increased state capacity. Paradoxically, even in an age of globalization, it remains important to complete the task of building a world of consolidated states: a world in which social movements, social movement unions and established trade unions will work together transnationally to construct democratic states: states that will fight to protect citizens' rights and that will possess the political capacity to do so.

Cumulatively, these articles discuss the Left's response to past crises and suggest questions about its response to present ones. Frequently intellectuals and activists have successfully sought to reach back into the socialist past for help in addressing contemporary issues. But what has the Left learned from the defeats and victories of the past decades? What political projects are worked out in sufficient detail and with attention to popular politics to meet the needs of politicians searching for programs?

In even the best of times, the most complete of victories, labor advance has never been across the board. For example, labor advancement has often been limited to white male workers. The growing importance of feminists and female activists within existing labor movements and the decline of traditional communities and bureaucratic unions suggest that women will no longer be consigned to the rear guard of the labor army. But even when activists seem to carry the day in triumph, there will inevitably be those dissatisfied and discontent within the movement who feel that their sacrifices have gone unrewarded. In many cases, their bitterness will be warranted. The real question is not whether the party program has been achieved down to the last "comma," but whether political leaders have done the best they can with the opportunities offered them.

Finally, it looks as if social movement unionism embodies the hopes of present-day labor movements. But social movement unionism encompasses a

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great variety of movements and relationships among parties, movements, and activists. Today we ask whether social movements and social movement unionism can successfully confront the challenges of our globalizing world with its collapsing global economy. We cannot tell. But any response should include all those measures and institutions that have successfully promoted international reform in the modern world including: consumer boycotts, labor solidarity and legislative regulation. Transnational activists must seek to build the widest possible coalition of popular movements.

Confronting us with a new insistence, victory and defeat reveal their complexities. The prospect of victory and the fear of defeat present urgent issues that will be answered not in an indefinite future but in the new world we live in now.

NOTES

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