

Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (editors), *The Politics of the Right: Socialist Register 2016*, Merlin Press, 392 pages, ISBN 9780850367133, £16.95

The nineteen essays contained in *Socialist Register 2016* are essential reference points for anyone actively engaged in progressive, radical or socialist political activity. International in scope, scholarly yet accessible, *The Politics of the Right* analyses the emergence of contemporary right-wing movements, parties and ideas from Japan to Brazil, India to Israel. As each contribution demonstrates, such an analysis is not just of academic interest but also has an urgent, practical relevance, ranging from geopolitical considerations to localised tactics. A survey of the American scene demonstrates the pressing relevance of this volume.

In early December 2015, Donald Trump, a leading contender in the race to become Republican nominee for President, called for Muslims to be barred from entry to the United States. In itself, Trump's demand was neither unexpected nor exceptional: the process of selecting a Republican candidate for the Presidency has long been infested by 'rouge' characters such as Trump and their vicious outbursts. Whether his demand was a calculated intervention into the debate on national security or, as seems more likely, he was just 'speaking his mind', it was of a piece with the convoluted processes to select a potential commander-in-chief of the planet's largest nuclear arsenal.

The unexpected and exceptional element of this episode is the impact it had on Trump's popularity. To summarize: his racism made him more popular amongst the Republican 'selectorate'. This popularity grew further as American broadcasters covered the story of an online petition to deny Trump entry to the United Kingdom. How can this be so? As Doug Henwood here points out in 'The American Right: From Margins to Mainstream',

'The Republican Party is now dominated by evolution-deniers, climate-change deniers, xenophobes, religious nuts. This seems not to alarm corporate America, which remains publicly devoted to diversity and the powers of instrumental reason ... [but] the big bourgeoisie wants it all, and is happy to let the ravers do some dirty work for them.' (pp 286)

Rather than publicly challenge or condemn such blatant assaults on the socially liberal consensus shared by the financial, industrial, property and media owning élites in American society, Trump is given free reign. For, as Henwood argues, short-term gain is the name of the game for corporate interests, and they are hedging their bets about whom they might end up doing business with come January 2017.

The impact of such an attitude on the Republican Party and American society at large is clear. As the extreme right of the Republican Party is given free reign to express and organise itself, the political centre of gravity within the Party as a whole has shifted to the right. This is not only because other sections of the Republican Party have become incapable of articulating alternative ideas in a sustained and convincing way, but also because the extreme right has shown itself capable of mobilising and appealing to the grass roots of American society.

Analysing the historical roots and appeal of right-wing ideas in the United States, Bill Fletcher Jr notes that '[w]hat is of particular political importance is the recognition that neoliberal capital does not have identical interests with the right-wing populist movements, particularly that segment of neoliberal capital that is linked with the transnational capitalist class' ('Stars and Bars: Understanding Right-Wing Populism in the USA', p298). Fletcher's analysis complements Henwood's who, whilst focusing on the organisational aspects of the Right's ascendancy, points towards the central dynamics in play.

Fletcher also notes that as 'right-wing populism looks for scapegoats it especially focuses on the identification of so-called *legitimate* and *illegitimate populations*. Right-wing populism cannot be understood outside of an analysis of "race".' What else motivated Trump in his call for barring Muslims and his demand for a wall on the Mexican border, other than racial scapegoating? One need look no further than the stark contradictions between the brutal treatment of activists in the Black Lives Matter movement and the light-touch management of an illegal occupation in Oregon to see the extent to which racism plays a part in the political 'process' and the state itself. Since early January, a group of heavily armed members of a right-wing militia have been occupying a wildlife reserve in south-east Oregon. They are not there to protest in support of environmental conservation, or to save a rare species from extinction. This militia demands that the US government hand over millions of acres of land to ranchers, the lumber and mining industries. Just to be clear: an armed group has occupied government owned buildings and has made political demands. Inspired by a multi-millionaire rancher and notorious

racist, this group presents itself as defenders of the American Constitution.

Now imagine what the consequences would be if, rather than a group of white racists, this property had been occupied by supporters of Black Lives Matter. Imagine what the response would be if, rather than calling for the opening up of natural resources to industrial exploitation, the occupiers had called for an end to police brutality. Supporters have occupied this property for some weeks unmolested. How many hours, minutes even, would anti-racists have been left to continue their peaceful protest? What if those occupying the wildlife reserve had been members of the indigenous nation, laying reasonable claim to their historic lands? How long would the state have tolerated their presence?

The United States is not the only largely anglophone nation considered in this volume. Richard Seymour provides a lively and incisive survey of one aspect of the situation in Britain in 'UKIP and the Crisis of Britain'. He begins: 'The barely told story of the British general election of May 2015 is the almost four million votes accumulated by the hard right UK Independence Party'. If taken together with the total Conservative vote, these votes account for nearly half of all votes cast. Further, although UKIP won only a single seat in parliament under current electoral rules, Seymour states that a system of proportional representation would have returned 83 UKIP members of parliament.

Seymour challenges the narrative contained in such works as Ford and Godwin's *Revolt on the Right* which suggests that UKIP's growth has been the result of its appeal to white, working class voters who feel abandoned by the Labour Party. Rather than boosting its popularity and appeal by taking up the issues faced by previously Labour-voting communities, UKIP's four million votes were preponderantly right-wing ones. His evidence for this comes from an examination of political events between the 2010 and 2015 general elections. Whilst identifying brief moments where it appeared that the Left might make some headway – the student protests of 2010 and united strike action in 2011 – Seymour contends that a series of 'moral panics' have shaped British society and opinion. He cites the responses to the widespread rioting of August 2011; the controversy surrounding the cases of Pakistani men found to be grooming and raping underage girls; the media-centred hounding of welfare recipients; 'extremism' in schools; and fear of 'invasion' when the borders were opened to Bulgarian and Romanian citizens of the European Union.

Seymour convincingly articulates the ways in which UKIP adapted its blatantly racist strategies from the 2010 campaign to an interpolated racism seen in the 2015 campaign. By echoing media hysteria over the

'panic' issues, riding the waves created by the Tories responses and organising on-the-ground campaigns in target areas, UKIP built its base of support. To reinforce his claims, Seymour quotes statistics to the effect that, of its 2015 vote, 43 per cent of UKIP voters had previously supported the Conservatives whilst 14 per cent had supported Labour.

Seymour deploys a form of Gramscian analysis pioneered by the late Stuart Hall, in particular the idea of 'counter-transformism', to develop a theoretical framework for understanding UKIP's dynamics. 'Counter-transformism' is the contradictory counterpart to 'transformism', a process by which political blocs are consolidated at the political 'centre' as part of the development of societal and economic change ('passive revolution', in Gramscian terms). Seymour references New Labour as an example of 'transformism', resulting from the 'passive revolution' brought about by Thatcherism. 'Counter-transformism' is a process by which political forces at the centre can be dragged to the Left, or in the case of UKIP, the Right. In this framework, UKIP can be understood as acting to 'articulate a range of class-specific discontents within a nationalist discourse, to incorporate diverse class strata into an attack on the existing ... consensus, and to re-polarize national politics, in this case to the Right'. (p 37)

Such a process is time limited and fragile, depending to a great extent on the inability of the Labour Party to mobilise and organise its support in a meaningful non-election focused fashion. Probably written in the weeks immediately bracketing the 2015 election, Seymour will not have had the opportunity to factor the 'Corbyn for Leader' campaign into this part of his analysis of UKIP's likely trajectory. However, given the title of his forthcoming book, *Corbyn: The Crisis of British Politics*, we should expect to hear more about Jeremy's own brand of 'counter-transformism'.

The final contribution that will be covered in this review is Gavan McCormack's 'Chauvinist Nationalism in Japan's Schizophrenic State'. McCormack's article is particularly useful in that it covers a vital aspect of Japanese politics, providing the context for a number of recent events that would otherwise appear puzzling. For example, protests organised by 'Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy' outside of the Diet – Japanese parliament – reached a high point in August 2015 in response to Prime Minister Abe's plans to remove the pacifist clause from Japan's constitution. These protests have been characterised as the culmination of a movement that emerged in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011.

At the very end of 2015, the governments of South Korea and Japan came to an agreement over the 'comfort women' – women forced into

sexual slavery in Japanese brothels in occupied territories before and during World War Two. Without consulting the surviving women involved, the South Korean government agreed to £5.6million compensation to be paid by Japan, and the prospect of negotiations over other issues related to the episode.

What possible motivation could there be for Japan to amend its pacifist constitution? Why after so many decades of avoiding the issue, would right-wing premier Abe agree to a deal on ‘comfort women’? Why risk disruption on the streets and opposition from your closest allies in government?

McCormack identifies Abe as ‘a politician who (in)famously looks with pride on Japan’s feudal and fascist past, but who, Janus-like, is at once deeply hostile towards the United States and utterly servile to it’. The political outlook and composition of the current Japanese administration is portrayed in deeply sinister terms in McCormack’s analysis. Just as sinister is his identification of the Japanese leader as ‘the most enthusiastically pro-American of contemporary world leaders’. (p 232)

In conclusion, McCormack asserts that the

‘paradoxical Japanese state, founded and structured seventy years ago by US forces as a dependency, chose in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century to deepen that relationship into the “client state” or *zokkoku*, and since then seeks to further reinforce military and strategic integration with the US on an anti-Chinese axis whilst widening and deepening economic and financial submission.’

So, in order to maintain its client status with the US, Prime Minister Abe is willing to compromise with another US client. In order to maintain and extend its military – as well as economic – influence on the Chinese periphery, the US is willing to tolerate a Prime Minister who, at the very least, can be said to have sympathy with Japan’s imperial and fascist past.

There is much more besides this survey of a small selection of contributions within the 392 pages of the *Socialist Register 2016*. As with previous volumes, *The Politics of the Right* makes a substantial contribution to our collective understanding of past, current and unfolding events, and will help inform our responses.

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