

Studying Socialism Today. Why and How? Conference Report on the Workshop Dimensions of Socialism

Veranstalter: International Young Scholars' Network „History of Societies and Socialisms“ (HOSAS)

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Socialism is an old idea. The ideas and movements that can be subsumed under the term, encompassing a plethora of radical or moderate shades, have shaped the course of human history over the last two hundred years. One could argue that its two most consequential materializations do not only highlight the wide range of political theories and practices connected to the concept of socialism but they also mark the two opposite poles of modern-world left-wing politics: Stalinist communism and social democracy. And yet, the quest for social justice, individual freedom, collective solidarity, and civil equality continues to shape modern politics all over the world in various forms just as much as the struggle for the interpretative power over the very meaning and definition of these core principles continues to preoccupy its contemporary advocates.

The academic study of socialism is nearly as old. The workshop „Dimensions of Socialism“ sought both to inspire and to document a renewal, if not departure, from the conventional scholarly research into the theory and practice of socialism(s) all over the world in the 19th and 20th century. More than twenty years after the fall of communism, after a period that was dominated first by all out condemnation and then by the near neglect of socialism as subject of academic inquiry, the workshop was the first meeting of the newly founded International Young Scholars' Network „History of Societies and Socialisms“¹.

It aimed at bringing together and connecting newest research on the history of societies and socialisms and at providing a forum for transnational and interdisciplinary exchange for young scholars. The workshop was organized by Christina Morina (Jena), Sebastian

Schickl (Mannheim), and Laura Polexe (Basel) and supported by the Jena Center 20th Century History, the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and the International Institute for Social History.

Remarkably, among present-day scholars of socialisms, a thematic predilection seems to exist for the political, intellectual and what could be called biographical history of socialisms. Accordingly most papers presented at the workshop dealt with socialism as social theory and political ideology (internationalism, commun(al)ism, ethics, economic theory, anarchism, Buddhism), with political strategies and practices of communist parties in „real-existing“ socialist countries and of Western-style social democratic parties (the „Jewish Question“ after the communist takeover in Hungary, economic policy under Helmut Schmidt, judicial policy in Romania, European integration), and with the personal experience of socialism (as activist, informer, theorist, renegade, victim). Thus, Russia, the motherland of modern communism, was virtually absent from the thematic spectrum as separate theme; it rather lingered through the discussions as omnipresent blueprint and central point of reference for other socialisms in power (examples Hungary, GDR, Czechoslovakia).

Chronologically, most papers were situated in the period between 1918 and 1989, yet a few scattered projects addressed the roots and remnants of socialism in the 1890s and the 1990s, respectively (genesis of the Marxist *Weltanschauung* in fin-de-siècle Europe, European socialist activists in 19th century Latin America; British Marxists after 1989, French and German Maoists after 1968). Finally, both the geographical and disciplinary range of the participants' background was as diverse as one could hope for: the roughly 50 participants came from 18 different countries and the fields they represented included history, political science, art and architectural history, geography, sociology, and philosophy. About half of the participants were working on their dissertations, the other half consisted of post-docs and even some well-established scholars in their fields of expertise, thus in accordance with the workshop organizers' intentions, the

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panels spent much time discussing the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological questions involved as well as old and new sources and their critical analysis (yet, ironically, among the students of collectivism, the suggested self-governed panel-moderation and time-regulation did not work out as well).

The workshop was divided into 12 panels with a thematic focus on the history of ideas and history of parties and movements. The first session (panels 1 and 2 were held jointly) opened a comparative perspective on political strategies and power practices in socialist and communist states and among Jewish communist activists. ŽIGA KONCILIJA (Ljubljana) and KATA BOHUS (Budapest) analyzed the peculiarities of the communist take-over of power after 1945 in Slovenia and Hungary respectively. Koncilija demonstrated how crucial the Communists' transformational grip on the judicial system was until the early 1950s for the stability of their political regime. After an initial phase of arbitrary killings right after the end of the war, about 20,000 Slovenians were indicted and 8,000 of them convicted for alleged subversive activities.

While Koncilija was concerned with the birth of the Slovenian communist system, Bohus' paper dealt with the first existential crisis of the Hungarian communist regime in 1956 and the communists' handling of the „Jewish question“ in its wake. For the Kádár-regime, tangled up in a Soviet-supported battle against „counterrevolutionary“ forces (allegedly including „anti-Semist incidents“), the factual persecution of Jewish intellectuals, and attempts to gain domestic and international legitimacy, the relationship to the state of Israel became a crucial pond. First allowing and in 1957 abruptly halting the emigration of Hungarian Jews (and their assets) to Israel, Kádár used the „Jewish question“ first to gain international prestige – Israel was the first state to acknowledge his regime – and to ameliorate his country's dire housing and unemployment situation, and then, halting emigration, to appease Soviet policy in the Middle East which called for support of Arab interests against Israel. This complex domestic and foreign policy situation under whose surface the story of the continuation of anti-Semitism in postwar Hungary lingered,

formed the key theme of Bohus' presentation. Her and Koncilija's focus on political and strategic thinking and action among communists in power opened the workshop with a reminder that studying socialism as practice is as much about ideals and ideas as about the real world and *Realpolitik*.

The then following panels discussed a wide range of socialist programs, practices, and experiences: from urban planning to health discourses, from internationalism, European integration policies and economic planning to „radical, fringe, and obscure“ phenomena such as Jewish anarchism, Buddhist socialism, and left-wing radicalism in West Germany. The transnational design of the HOSAS-network may justify also highlighting the panel on „Solidarity and Transnationalism.“ All presentations provided the grounds for an interesting discussion on various aspects of transnationalism, internationalism and international solidarity in a historical perspective. TALBOT IMLAY (Québec) opened the panel with a broad view on „The Practice of Socialist Internationalism During the 20th Century.“ His paper dealt in particular with the nature of the „internationalist identity“ that grew and rooted in European socialist parties in the course of the last century, especially after 1945. Given the (still) strong standing of the national paradigm, Imlay posed the question whether it was/is possible to „internationalize internationalism.“

TIM WÄTZOLD (Cologne) examined a very different form of internationalism, namely the mass immigration of labor activists to South America and the considerable impact their „baggages“ filled with revolutionary ideas and concepts of class struggle and proletarian identity had on local labor conditions between 1880 and 1930. Lastly, KASPER BRASKÉN's (Turku, Finland) presentation on „The Revival of International Solidarity - The Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, Willi Münzenberg and the Comintern in Weimar Germany, 1921–1933“ offered the opportunity to debate the study of internationalism and socialism in broader, conceptual terms. The presence of Ursula Langkau-Alex (Amsterdam), an expert on Willy Münzenberg and German exiles 1933–1940, was helpful here. The discussion focused on the complex correlation

between interwar international solidarity, the general quest for peace and the Soviet role in the international working-class movement. Issues of ideology, policies, and practices are involved – both on the national and inter-/transnational level. The panel discussion stressed that studying the idea and practices of internationalism is crucial for the understanding of socialism.

Finally, a number of papers dealt with the repercussions of the break-up of the communist bloc in 1989, particularly from a narrative – biographical and autobiographical – perspective. Two papers addressed the British case showing a remarkable sensitivity and interest in the intellectual and emotional commitment on the Left before and after the fall of communism: JOSEPH MASLEN (Manchester) talked about the political and „emotional“ life of cultural historian Raphael Samuel (1934-96) and EVAN SMITH's (Adelaide, Australia) paper „Neither Forwards nor Backwards, but Sideways“ dealt with the disenchantment among British Marxists with Soviet-style socialism long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. These papers were especially inspiring because they made „us“ feel „young.“ Examining the political engagement of the (grand-) parent generation underlines indeed how needed and fruitful fresh and thus often innovative approaches to the study of socialism as world view and political practice can be.

Two key-note speakers, honorary members of the HOSAS-network MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN (Amsterdam) and HELGA GREBING (Berlin), took up the task to discuss the relevance of (studying) socialism today – the past, present and future of socialism as idea and political program. Both speakers chose quite distinct approaches to the subject: van der Linden returned to Marx' theory of the proletariat and argued for the widening of his definition to inspire empirical research of and political action on labor as a problematic global phenomenon (routinely still involving slave labor, exploitation, and human misery); from a political-practical point of view, Grebing debated the turbulent, incompletely triumphant history, the somewhat sobering present and the certainly unsure future of European social democracy. Both talks were gree-

ted with lively discussions which once again illuminated the intricate link between socialisms (plural!) as academic subject and socialism (singular!) as political program.

Yet, that link came only to the fore when discussions turned towards the broader picture, the realm of more general conclusions and observations as to the state and future of human socio-economic relations. All 12 panels kept the discussions mostly „academic“ – without, however, narrowing the view but instead widening the perspectives beyond and beneath the surface of left politics and ideologies. Rather, focus was on balancing out socialisms' various legacies: the conference proceedings highlighted the extent to which socialism(s), perhaps more than any other modern political-cultural project, continue(s) to inspire utopian visions and/or normative expectations. The vast majority of presentations contrasted – either implicitly or explicitly – theories of socialism with practices and only a few focused only its theoretical/discursive articulations. Maybe characteristic of the post-1989 political landscape or simply because to many, socialism is an idea of the past, ready to be „historisiert“, most contributions were aimed at exposing the apparent disparities between socialist programs or ideals and the realities of their implementation.

Assessments of these disparities that aimed at contextualizing and thereby explaining and understanding them pointed to external factors, processes, and pressures (such as the rise of postwar consumerism, post-Fordist economic restructuring, deep-rooted Hungarian anti-Semitism, or the hegemony of nationalist discourse in the Habsburg Empire) – all of which derailed plans for implementing „genuine“ socialist ideals. Others, in contrast, located the reasons for these disparities within the socialist movements themselves (revolutionary dynamics, moral and/or power corruption, and the like). A few papers, however, sought to transcend the binary opposition of theory vs. practice altogether and tried to show either that practices of socialism reconstituted socialism's theoretical content or that socialists' experiences and contested memories are inseparable from socialism's program and legacy. Overall, the need that many scho-

lars seem to feel to set socialism's programmatic doctrines – in whatever version and color they were postulated – against its record reveals socialism's powerful teleological thrust.

This may represent both a benefit and a liability for movements associating themselves (today and tomorrow) with socialism. As scholars, it is likely most productive to discard normative expectations of what constitutes socialism beyond the broadest of definitions, to shun the tragic or triumphalist register in discussing socialism, and to investigate what socialism meant in various contexts, how it assumed those meanings and why. This does not preclude political engagement or sympathy, but it is something different.²

Workshop overview:

Panel 1+2 (joint session): Politics & Power: Policies and Strategies; State, Society, Individual

Todor Hristov (The University of Sofia):
Tyranny, Ideology, and the Constitution of Socialist Subjects

Žiga Koncilija (Institute for Contemporary History, Slovenia):
Main Characteristics of the Judicial System as Main Tool of Repression in Slovenia between 1945 and 1951

Libora Oates-Indruchová (paper only, Charles University Prague):
Censorship and Self-censorship in Social Sciences During State Socialism

Kata Bohus (Central European University Budapest):
The Hungarian Socialist State and the „Jewish Question“ (1956-1960). Interdependencies and Discrepancies between Foreign and Domestic Policies

Gerben Zaagsma (University College London):
Transnational Dimensions of Jewish Political Practices in Western Europe before World War II

Sarah Graber Majchrzak (Berlin):
„In the Same Boat“ despite the Iron Curtain? Labor Relations and Structural Change in the 1970s and 1980s in the Wharves of Western and Eastern Europe

Talk Marcel van der Linden (IISG): „Why does research on socialisms (still) matter?“

Panel 3: Culture & Leisure: Urban Space and Planning

Jonathan Howlett (University of Bristol):
From „Imperialist Stronghold“ to Socialist City: Shanghai 1949-1954

Tobias Zervosen (Berlin):
Explaining the GDR's Architectural History Against the Background of Social and Political History

Daniela Schmol (University of Jena):
Communal Construction in the Weimar Republic

Mariusz Czepczyński (Tübingen, Gdańsk):
Landscaping socialist cities. Between ideas and implementations.

Panel 4: Parties & Movements I: Solidarity and Transnationalism

Talbot Imlay (Université Laval, Québec):
The Practice of Socialist Internationalism During the 20th Century

Kasper Braskén (Åbo Akademi University, Finland):
The Revival of International Solidarity: The Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH), Willi Münzenberg, and Comintern in Weimar Germany, 1921–1933

Tim Wätzold (Cologne):
The Influence of European Immigrants in the Developing Labour Movements and Trade Unions in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile from 1880 until 1930

Panel 5: Parties & Movements II: War and Revolution

Mitja Sunčič (Institute for Contemporary History Ljubljana):
Some Aspects of the Communist Revolution in Yugoslavia

Gleb J. Albert (Bielefeld University):
Enacting World Revolution at Home. Discour-

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ses and Practices of Revolutionary Internationalism in Early Soviet Society

Nicolas Lépine (University of Laval, Québec): International Socialism and the Spanish Civil War

Panel 6: Parties & Movements III: Socialism and European Integration

Matthew Broad (University of Reading): Joining Europe? British and Danish Socialists and the Road to the EC's First Enlargement

Christian Salm (University of Portsmouth): Regional or Global? Socialist Party Networks in EC Development Policy

Brian Shaev (University of Pittsburgh): A „Socialist United States of Europe“? The French Socialist Party and Initiatives for European Integration, 1943-1957

Talk Helga Grebing (Berlin): „Socialism and Social Democracy as Political Program in Europe Today“

Panel 7: Ideas & Programs I: Socialist Theories and Practices

C. Alexander McKinley (St. Ambrose University): Georges Sorel and the Ethics of Production

Jakub Beneš (University of California, Davis): Competing Narratives and Clashing Utopias: A New Perspective on Nationalism in the Austrian Social Democratic Party, 1889-1914

Giovanni Bernardini (University of Padova): A „New“ Social Democracy? The SPD and the International Debate on the Economic Crisis of the 1970s

Panel 8: Ideas & Programs II: Radical, Fringe, and Obscure

Moshe Maggid (University of Jerusalem): The Worse It Gets, the Better It Is. Teaching Anarchism to the Masses: The Warheit

James Mark Shields (Bucknell University): Confessions of a Japanese Opiate-Eater. Seno'o Girō and the Legacy of Buddhist Socialism in Postwar Japan

Jacco Pekelder (Universiteit Utrecht): „Umfeld“: Germany's Leftwing Radicals and the Red Army Faction 1970-1980

Panel 9: Ideas & Programs III: Health and Science

Neula Kerr-Boyle (University College London): Socialist Bodies: Fighting Fat in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1989

Dominique Behnke (University of Vienna, Austria): Ageing and Socialism: The Establishment of Gerontology as a Scientific Specialty in the German Democratic Republic

Panel 10: Ideas & Programs IV: 1989/91 and Beyond

Andreas Fagerholm (Åbo Akademi University Vaasa): The West European Radical Left and the Collapse of „Real Socialism“: A Comparative Examination

Joseph Maslen (University of Manchester): The Emotional Ambivalence of Left-Wing Life Stories in Twentieth-Century Britain

Evan Smith (paper only, Flinders University): Neither Forwards nor Backwards, but Sideways: British Marxism and the End of the Soviet Union (in absence)

Panel 11: Biographies & Narratives I: Experience and Engagement

Agnès Arp (Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena): Workplace and Utopia: Life Trajectories of Maoists in Germany and France

Ondrej Matejka (Geneva University/Charles University): „We are the Generation that will Construct Socialism.“ The Czech 68ers between Manifest Destiny and Mark of Cain

Christina Morina (Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena): The Trouble with Reality: Cognition and World View in the Life and Work of Leading Marxists (1871-1918)

Shakar Rahav (Haifa University): Constructing Collective Utopias: From Russia to Asia

Panel 12: Biographies & Narratives II: Narrating (Personal) History

Enrico Zanette (Frankfurt am Main/Bologna):
Struggling Auto-Biographies. Self-narration
Practices in Early Socialism

Günther Sandner (University of Vienna):
Socialist, Neo-Positivist, and Social Engineer:
The Case of Otto Neurath (1882-1945)

Florin Poenaru (Central European University,
Budapest):

Writing the Past of Socialism: An Analysis of
the „Truth Commissions“ in Romania and the
Republic of Moldova

Olga Sezneva (Universiteit van Amsterdam):
Architecture of Descent: Urban Development,
Historical Reconstruction, and the Politics of
Belonging in Kaliningrad, the Former Königs-
berg

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