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Reviews

Horizons for a New Left

- Reviews section -

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Books taking a hard look at the current state of “the left” are rarely upbeat, let alone inspiring. Alan Sears’ *The Next New Left* successfully achieves this without dreaminess or utopian speculation.

Sears (professor of sociology, Ryerson University and a member of Canada’s New Socialist Group) brings many years of activist work as well as academic study to the task, which involves both theoretical innovation and an important historical perspective on radical politics in the 20th century, focusing largely though not exclusively on Canada and the United States.

His style is engaging, easily mixing research and personal story telling, rendering the slender volume a near page-turner. The reader has a sense of being directly addressed by a smart, self-critical and humane veteran activist thinking seriously about the present and its connection to past and future.

Sears begins with a fundamental question asked in articles, meetings and casual discussions amongst radicals in recent years: Why hasn’t more come from this time of austerity and aggressive neo-liberalism “more politics, more organization, more groups in motion, more fightback?”

“This,” as Sears states on the book’s first page, “should be a heady time for anti-capitalist organizing....Yet, at the present time people are not flocking in large numbers towards radical activism.” (1)

Key to Sears’ analysis is the concept of “infrastructure of dissent,” which he defines as “the means through which activists develop political communities capable of learning, communicating and mobilizing together.” (2)

Essentially, such an infrastructure is the ground upon which left activism stands, consisting of informal community, workplace, and leisure spaces, as well as more formal and organizational ones. What might be perceived as spontaneous political action arises from such spaces.

The theoretical problem, as Sears understands it, derives from the fact that, while for much of the 20th century an infrastructure of dissent could be taken for granted, it has substantially eroded over the past 35 years. This, Sears argues, is fundamentally connected to the decline of the anti-capitalist left insofar as it can no longer take for granted the conditions for its own existence.

Helpfully re-employing an analogy made by Trotsky, Sears illustrates our altered historical situation: While “Trotsky argued that the goal was to channel the steam of mass activism through the piston of organization to generate revolutionary power,” we now “find ourselves in a historical moment where we need to think about the problem of the steam itself, inquiring into the specific circumstances that are conducive to working-class self-activity, movement activism and the development of critical consciousness.” (4)

Remaking the Challenge

While the book is heavily referenced both to theoretical and empirical sources, Gramsci more than any other figure stands at the center of Sears’ theoretical frame. An infrastructure of dissent is key to challenging the hegemony of ruling class ideas continually perpetrated through control of resources and institutions.

Because capitalism remakes itself, revolutionizing the means of production, moving at a faster and faster pace, infrastructures of dissent “cannot be built once and for all time but must be rebuilt and renewed.” (9) In this regard Sears examines “the development and erosion of the infrastructure of dissent over two periods of mass insurgency, the 1930s-1940s and the 1960s-1970s.” (23)

This is a story of both continuities and discontinuities. As far as our current situation goes, he states “The existing left is too marginal to form the foundation for the next one, and thus there will necessarily be only limited continuity in terms of membership, collective memory and sustained cultures of resistance... This discontinuity will be greater than at any time during the twentieth century, when each subsequent radicalization was influenced by its encounter with layers of activists who had experienced previous activist upturns.” (11)

Infrastructures of dissent, by Sears’ account, provide four essential capacities to radical movements: collective memory, collective dreams, collective learning, and the capacity for solidarity.

Since the dominant historical narratives in capitalist society are channeled through ruling-class power relations, the nature and meaning of past struggle needs to be retained through counter-hegemonic infrastructures. These, however, are often tied to particular locations and spaces that are continually altered and broken by changes in the markets and strategies of capital.

Collective memory is tied to the capacity for collective dreams, i.e. the ability to imagine alternative possibilities through the profound achievements of previous action and regional victory.

In addition, infrastructures of dissent are cultural formations that allow for collective learning through formal and informal means, leading in turn to the development of a layer of worker intellectuals. The current weakening of anti-capitalist organizations coincides with the loss of this dimension.

Finally, all this is connected to the capacity for solidarity. Sears correctly notes that solidarity doesn’t automatically exist on the basis of a shared oppression. Rather than something preexistent that simply needs to be discovered, it is something that must be made and remade. Radical spaces and the struggles generated out of them can and must lead to reconfigured and reenergized conceptions of who we are.

Where Did the Dissent Go?

Sears uses this theoretical framework to locate a historical sequence involving construction, dismantling and reconfiguring of infrastructures of dissent beginning from the mass insurgency of the 1930s-1940s and continuing up to the present. Each page is rich in historical detail, which can only briefly be touched on here, the accumulation of which contributes to the clarity of vision reached at the book’s conclusion.

Sears begins by describing the 1945 Windsor (Ontario) Ford strike where 10,000 workers walked out with large scale community support and mobilization, including a 2000-vehicle blockade spanning 20 city blocks which resisted efforts by local and national police to breach it. In this regard Sears cites, with some approval, Italian workerist writer Mario Tronti’s somewhat unorthodox claim that working class militancy in North America at that time remains historically unmatched.

The story is deeply compelling, though the main point is to think about the conditions for its possibility. Unionism had been significantly defeated in the 1920s. In addition to a concerted political attack on the left, in manufacturing sectors “employers restructured labour processes around the rhythms of the assembly line. They also used employee representation systems...to draw energy away from organizing drives.” (35)

Sears notes, however, the importance of shop stewards who emerged out of these representation systems for future shop floor activism “including networks of communication, learning, memory and solidarity that were crucial in developing shop-floor counter-culture.”

Combined with anti-capitalist political organization, substantial working class self-education occurred. But just as importantly, infrastructures of dissent linked workplace and larger community. A strike was a community event often including parades and other celebratory events. Community and ethnic centers were also crucial insofar as they provided spaces for both union organizing and dance classes.

Given shared communities near the workplace, socializing in local bars, cultural spaces, and multiple anti-capitalist organizations operating against a background of a very real international communist movement, mass mobilization was a real possibility during this era.

By 1950, this infrastructure was mostly gone. Here, Sears includes discussions of McCarthyism, the postwar settlement where more workers were able to see themselves as “middle class” and more were considered “white.” Suburbia and consumerism offered the possibility of a “private utopia,” while consumerist choice was linked to a politics of individualist freedom.

The '60s and '70s

In this changing context, a number of theorists and organizations shared the “vital sense that leftism needed to be remade, not simply preserved, in light of a historical dead end.” (68)

Sears suggests that these efforts to remake the left in the 1960s-1970s embodied four themes:

First, the rise of the Third World played a galvanizing role, challenging the Cold War order...and creating new possibilities for a more global conception of the left. Second, the political mobilizations were largely driven by those who were partially or totally excluded from the postwar settlement, including people of colour, women, Indigenous people, lesbians and gays, students, youth and workers in areas not previously organized. Third, the new mobilization by workers was led in important ways by younger and previously excluded workers...Finally, the mobilization recast the radical imagination, raising important questions about the quality of life, global justice, sexual freedom, anti-colonialism, ecology, socialism and freedom, cultural integrity and anti-oppression. (76)

The emerging infrastructure included large anti-capitalist political organizations, politicized communities of color, campus and urban spaces which included teach-ins, radio stations, guerilla publications, theater and music, political communes, as well as “ways of knowing that demanded rethinking from the anti-capitalist left as well as from mainstream institutions” that were self-generated by “feminists, black power activists, lesbian/gay liberationists, Indigenous mobilizations and ecology advocates.” (84)

While there was some continuity with the infrastructures of the 1930s-1940s, the infrastructures of the 1960s-1970s were substantially new. Of course, Sears notes, by the late 1970s, “the state and capital began to orient towards a deeper counter-offensive, which would ultimately shred the post-war settlement.” (87)

The neoliberal assault, in order to achieve hegemony, contained two different dimensions: destruction of the old order and consolidation of the new one:

The destruction of the existing settlement required an unwavering commitment to tearing down programs, recasting relationships and shifting expectations, even those with substantial popular legitimacy. The moment of destructions

often creates short-term damage and even may appear irrational as a result. Governments associated primarily with destruction of the old settlement included those of Thatcher, Reagan, [Brian] Mulroney [in Canada], both Bushes and [current Canadian prime minister Stephen] Harper. In contrast attempts to build new hegemonic relations are associated with the Clinton government, New Labour in Britain and periods of Liberal federal government in Canada... (89)

The left was often in the difficult position of defending underfunded, compromised, bureaucratized institutions and services in the context of a reconfigured spatial universe with movable sites of (lean) production and changing urban environments. Ultimately, Sears points to the still developing moral framework of market discipline: "Market discipline is based on the core principle that people have rights only to what they can pay for, and everything should have a price."(94)

This is not to say that public opinion doesn't still favor a commitment to public health care, education and social services. The problem is rather the inability to imagine an alternative, which is precisely what an infrastructure of dissent can help provide.

What's Next and Its Discontinuities

Up to this point in Sears' account, we have witnessed a certain rhythm of changing infrastructures of dissent tied to changes in capitalism. So it follows that, on the one hand, we simply need to get to work building the next new left. After all, it has been done before and we can do it again. But on the other, Sears has indicated that the next left, while involving some continuity, will involve more discontinuity than at any point in history.

Here we encounter a slightly under-theorized moment in Sears' presentation. While we face a situation that resembles previous crises of the revolutionary left, we also find ourselves at a moment that may require a greater reinvention of the western left than at any time since perhaps the 1840s.

Consequently, it is unclear whether this reinvention is of a qualitatively different kind than has occurred in the past. Some readers may reasonably interpret the text this way, though others may not.

One might wonder at this point why this review began with an expression of optimism, when it seems that Sears has delivered us to the same world of frustration and inability to act with which we began. But this is not the case. At this point, the reader's vision should be clearer: the tasks ahead involve rebuilding anew an infrastructure of dissent.

Sears identifies four themes, already visible, that point to the flavor of the next left and its infrastructure:

First, young people have played a central role in many of the crucial struggles since 2008, both because they are being squeezed hard by austerity conditions and because they have not yet been worn down into resignation. Second, questions of democracy have loomed large in many of these struggles. Third, the most successful struggles have been marked by an audacity, moving beyond fighting against austerity to create a transformative vision. Finally, the character of these struggles shows the need for an integrative liberation politics. (101)

Furthermore, the next left will have to be a pluralistic, learning left where people continually grow through participation not wedded to a fixed faith.

Optimism? Absolutely. While mass mobilization and large-scale militancy cannot be conjured out of the air, the next task "building the infrastructure" awaits just outside the door: in all of the spaces in which we move, and in varied kinds of activism.

Horizons for a New Left

Reading Sears' book allows for a kind of Gestalt switch, allowing us to get back to work, but with a new and refreshed perspective, doing the work of preparation for the next new left.