Review Essay

The politics of twenty-first century socialism

Auguste Blanqui and the politics of popular empowerment
Phillippe Le Goff Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020, 272 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1-3500-7679-2,

Socialist practice: Histories and theories
Victor Wallis Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020, xx + 252 pp.,
ISBN: 978-3-030-35065-9

Contemporary Political Theory (2021) **20,** S99–S105. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00459-5; published online 15 January 2021

The re-emergence of socialism in Anglosphere public discourse, while unexpected, appears as a simple story: growing awareness of capitalism's flaws in the wake of the great financial crisis coalesced into movements like Occupy and then gave rise to openly socialist politicians' viable candidacies for highest office in both the US and the UK. But, crucially, this deterministic – one might say 'vulgar materialist' – view leaves out the political work that has already contributed to this socialist revival and that now seems more necessary than ever to sustain it. With electoral experiments defeated and authoritarian strongmen and conspiracy theorists canalizing ever more discontent, it is now clear that the mainstreaming of socialist consciousness – undoubtedly engendered by capitalism's current crisis – is nonetheless also a fragile achievement of organizational activity whose future depends on the continuation of such efforts.

New books by Victor Wallis and Philippe Le Goff can help illuminate this problematic. Both authors invert the usual path into investigating socialism by beginning with politics rather than economics. Wallis' *Socialist Practice: Histories and Theories* (2020) asks how fragmented movements against economic inequality might galvanize a more powerful general movement. He suggests that such solidarity requires conscious, principled organization aimed at demonstrating how different experiences of domination find common cause in class domination under capitalism. Le Goff's *Auguste Blanqui and the Politics of Popular Empowerment* (2020) pursues similar questions of principled commitment and organization by reconstructing the political thought of nineteenth-century French revolutionary socialist Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881). For the Marxist political movements which rose to prominence after his death, Blanqui came to symbolize a conspiratorial

mode of elitist politics left behind by mass working class organizations, and he has remained excluded from the socialist canon ever since. Le Goff bucks this trend, reclaiming Blanqui as a thinker of the ever-possible work of organizing popular empowerment. Both authors thus provide probing accounts of socialism as, fundamentally, a problem of political organization.

Wallis' *Socialist Practice* begins with the premise that movements trying to resolve the current political crisis are excessively particularistic in their aims and that the full-throated restoration of Marxism as a 'body of thought and experience' (69) is the best way to attain the level of generality needed to render such movements effective. As he puts it, 'now that socialism has been "placed on the table," its true nature and requirements must be made clearer, with due attention to the experiences that have brought different sectors of the population to their present openness' (24). His book is divided into two parts, the first outlining this 'basic body of theory' and the second consisting of its 'historical applications'. This is, of course, quite an arbitrary division for a Marxist to make: in the spirit of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Wallis' 'applications' often turn into theoretical reflections in their own right, while his 'theory' discussions are for the most part embedded in 'practical' meditations on events. The book's arbitrary organization derives, no doubt, from the fact that its twelve chapters draw from material Wallis has published elsewhere across several decades of activism and scholarship. This gives the book a slightly disjointed feel, but the red thread running throughout is what Wallis calls a dialectical approach to socialist politics: maintaining sensitivity to the particular demands of diverse movements while bringing them together under the common socialist framework provided by the Marxist tradition.

Part I outlines Marxism's unique capacity for bringing a shared awareness to the fragmentation among oppositional groups. Wallis stresses that he is no partisan for a particular interpretation of Marx, advancing instead a deliberately vague account of Marxism as 'an approach to social reality' (14). Politically, this looks like a 'broad oppositional culture', 'nourished by continuous disclosure and analysis of state and corporate malfeasance' (33). The rest of the book can be read as elaborating Wallis' case for how to achieve this fine balance. Interestingly, Wallis follows with two essays published immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He polemically describes this moment as the 'end of the first phase of socialism', insisting that only those who buy the illusion of 'linear' historical progress would abandon Marxism in defeat. For Wallis, Marxism instead 'embodies the accretion of *all* the analyses and lessons arrived at in the course of its development', and therefore outlives its 'various practitioners' who are 'each conditioned and limited by the circumstances in which they work' (55). Marxism remains relevant because it provides a mode of analysis which allows particular demands to be thought in relation to all the others. Wallis defends class as the category which can provide this generality. In his analysis of intersectionality, he insists that class-difference is unique vis-à-vis other forms of difference because it 'exists *only* within a

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hierarchical structure, within which the ruling class *consciously* organizes its framework of control over every other sector of society' (72). This uniqueness allows class analysis to serve as a shared framework which can bring diverse struggles together without covering over the specificity of their demands.

The more 'practical' second part of the book includes reflections on key strategic questions as well as analyses of documentary films and protest songs. These chapters draw out the need to not only think the particular in the general but also maintain the productive tension between rupture and continuity in political organizing. Wallis' analysis of historical experiments in workers' control of factories is especially illuminating here. Since industrial self-management has arisen in such diverse political and economic frameworks – from weak parliamentary capitalism in 1920s Italy to democratic socialist Chile in the 1970s – Wallis concludes that 'there is no major factor which automatically excludes it' and, therefore, that 'the role of conscious choice must … be a large one' (118–119). The chapter suggests that workers' control over production is always an option, and its viability depends primarily on the level of awareness of this possibility, as well as the willingness of broader society to support it.

This vision of the potential for sudden seizures of power is combined with a sensitivity to long-term, continuous shifts in the broader political culture required to support such experiments. In a later chapter on the legacy of the 1960s on left politics in the US, Wallis defends the 60s against socialist detractors who have viewed the decade's countercultural movements as an abandonment of rigorous class struggle degenerating into the confused identity politics of today. Against this narrative of decline, Wallis argues that the sixties should instead be interpreted as a moment of left renewal after the post-war red scare: 'the reawakening of the labour movement, the expansion of electoral alternatives, and the deepening of community-based struggles [from this time] … carry the seeds of a popular mobilization that could grow to challenge capitalist priorities' in our own time (154). Such a 'culture of equality' – which Wallis sees as an enduring achievement of the last few decades – is a necessary condition for public support for experiments with socialism (120). The analyses of popular culture with which the book ends suggest how such a culture has already taken root in the US.

Wallis presents a diffuse vision of the diverse strategies and tactics that the organization of a socialist politics requires. At times, mentions of ecological crisis running throughout the book – continuing Wallis' previous work in *Red-Green Revolution* (2018) – hint at environmental emergency as the site of possibility for the emergence of an eco-socialist solidarity based on shared consciousness of planetary catastrophe. But there is no cunning of reason to be found here: the 'ecological class consciousness' Wallis advocates is something that must be fought for against the tendency to cover over and fragment the class nature of environmental issues (24).

The 'Marxist tradition' upon which Wallis grounds his lucid account of socialist theory and practice helps to preserve a politics of possibility – the vision of a shared class solidarity arising from the many expressions of anti-capitalism among the diverse movements of our era. But if *Socialist Practice* ends up focusing in large part on the conscious organizing work needed to forge this vision – and if, at the same time, the book is also clear-eyed about the failures of previous generations of Marxists to adequately think and perform this organizing work – then it seems to me that opening up Wallis' 'body of thought and experience' to alternative socialisms, those more directly concerned with 'the role of conscious choice', might help further bring out these vital political questions. Indeed, such an opening up to new resources beyond canonical socialism is consistent with the spirit of Wallis' book, reading as it does like a rich compendium of diverse reflections across many decades of scholarly and political work.

Enter Le Goff. His monograph aims to remedy the exclusion of Blanqui from the Marxist tradition, salvaging his notion of 'popular empowerment' as an antidote to deterministic accounts of collective action so prevalent in socialist politics. For Le Goff, one question motivated Blanqui throughout his life – 'How do [*sic*] an oppressed people identify the sources of their oppression, and what must they do to overcome and end it?' (15) – and it is the consistency with which he acted and reflected on this question that makes him worth studying. The book's five chapters represent the five conceptual building blocks Le Goff sees as constituting Blanqui's answer to the question of popular empowerment, bringing into view a revolutionary socialism that, provocatively, is rooted in an 'essential idealism' (157).

The first principle is the notion of 'intelligence': Le Goff deftly shows how, for Blanqui, the dissemination of this basic capacity is the *sine qua non* of justice and equality while, conversely, ignorance is the key obstacle. Importantly, such ignorance is not natural, but the result of a ruling class which actively stultifies the intelligence of the ruled. The second chapter, on 'conflict', shows how Blanqui seeks to expand awareness of deliberate structural violence by extending insurgent conflictual moments when popular uprisings clash with state repression and 'the true nature of politics and society [can] be clearly seen, understood, and learned from' (66). Le Goff then, in the third chapter, shows how this struggle against the domination of intelligence leads to Blanqui's *political* notion of the proletariat: an actor constituted only partially – and not primarily – through a position of objective economic exploitation. Pushing back against such 'symbolic turn' post-Marxists as Ernesto Laclau, Le Goff insists that this class-constitutive political logic is 'sustained by real or material, not nominal, political practices' (96). Blanqui's proletariat, in other words, is not a 'passive subject' waiting to be performatively invoked, but a 'conscious and organized, committed and resolute movement' already involved in its own concrete efforts (96, 110). The formation of this movement, chapter four argues, must begin from a common act of 'volition'. For

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Le Goff, Blanqui's 'patient realism' – surprising for a purported restive putschist – lies in his recognition that engendering such a 'general will' would require slow pedagogical boring into the hard boards of stultified intelligence (134). Le Goff's final chapter, on the philosophy of history in Blanqui's late work of astronomical speculation, *Eternity by the Stars*, ties these threads together. Le Goff shows how Blanqui insists on radically separating cosmic structure from human agency at the level of thought, constructing an anti-deterministic account of our place in the universe to strikingly illustrate how only the kind of organized political action elaborated in the previous chapters can '*make* progress and *make* history' (179).

The method according to which Le Goff fleshes out Blanqui's otherwise diffuse concept of popular empowerment raises some questions. Le Goff declares at the outset that his 'most basic (and consequential and contentious) move' is to treat Blanqui as a 'serious thinker'. This does not simply entail generosity to the nuances behind ideas that have otherwise been written off as naïve or unscholarly, but more controversially, it also means reconstructing a coherent 'body of thought' from Blanqui's scattered writings (14). Le Goff thus frequently lumps together quotes from very different moments across the long span of Blanqui's forty-plus year oeuvre in order to illustrate general points. He justifies this technique by simply asserting that the fundamental framework of Blanqui's political thought formed in the 1830s (in response to the betrayal of revolutionary Parisians by the July monarchy that their insurgency installed) and remained consistent thereafter (24, 60, 131, 181). After insisting early on that Rousseau heavily influenced Blanqui (18), Le Goff also frequently draws on the former to flesh out philosophical premises supposedly implicit in the latter, in particular regarding the key notions of general will and popular sovereignty upon which his reconstruction of Blanqui relies. A contextual approach, not indulging quite so much in the impulse to present Blanqui's 'body of work' as a consistent treatise, might have allowed Le Goff to engage certain key concepts in a more nuanced way that may have revealed more of the unruly originality of his thought. The concept of 'enlightenment', for example, while closely connected to Rousseau, appears in Blanqui's writings far less frequently alongside notions of 'general will', 'sovereignty', or 'reason' than Le Goff makes out.

It is on this question of enlightenment that Le Goff's methodological problem turns into a substantive one. Eager to disavow the potential authoritarianism he detects in the hierarchical model of Blanqui's enlightening pedagogy, Le Goff warns that Blanqui's 'pedagogical prerequisite … for decisive voluntary action' strays too close to 'the practices – and failures – of twentieth century communism' (139). Le Goff thus makes a familiar retreat when the topic of education as the necessary condition for political emancipation comes up, claiming that 'this is where Blanqui fails to go beyond Lenin' and citing the danger of 'vanguard substitutionism'. The term 'substitutionism' was first used by Trotsky in 1904 to describe the difference between 'two opposing methods of work' in a revolutionary

party: that which '*thinks for* the proletariat, which substitutes itself politically for it' and that which 'politically *educates* and *mobilises* the proletariat to exercise rational pressure on the will of all political groups and parties' (Trotsky, 1904, ch. 2). The problem with substitutionism, for Trotsky, is that it usurps the political role the collective of workers should play for themselves; the leader's abstract plan stands in for the concrete totality of the individuals, and the party exhibits a 'Jacobin mentality of distrust and suspicion towards the unorganised forces and the future' (Trotsky, 1904, ch. 4). Against substitutionism, Le Goff draws on contemporary radical democrat Michael Hardt to affirm the primacy of the spontaneous, self-organizing emergence of a collective political will from which organization and education must take their cues.

Le Goff's invocation of Hardt is confusing, since the latter's method – which traces 'insurgent coalitions' as symptoms of the 'circuits of social cooperation' (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p. 205) – seems radically opposed to the new theory of voluntarism Le Goff is trying to salvage from Blanqui. Le Goff presents Hardt as unproblematically resolving the problem of collective self-emancipation (138, 185), when in fact this problem is precisely one the latter's theory has done little to address and which sustained engagement with Blanqui – as Le Goff himself repeatedly argues – might help remedy. He insists that Blanqui 'underestimates' the capacity for popular self-emancipation but ends up bending the stick too far the other way, overestimating, with Hardt, the primacy of immediate participation over mediated representation rather than engaging troubling puzzles about the relation between them.

As an alternative to the 'active' replacement of popular movement by a pedagogical vanguard elite, Le Goff advocates Blanqui's 'reactive' or 'defensive' vanguardism: a leadership which clears obstacles in the path of a self-emancipated proletariat (48). But the line between an active pedagogical vanguard fomenting the movement and a reactive defensive vanguard protecting the movement from forces trying to stop it is often blurry. If the obstacles and threats from which movements need protection are not always easy to define, and if the justification for a defensive vanguard therefore lies in its apparently superior capacity to identify and communicate the nature of such threats, then a vanguard's role in the protection of a self-emancipating movement still contains a pedagogical dimension. This tension plays out in Wallis as well, who also grapples with the question of vanguardism. Rejecting the view that the clarification of shared structural conditions is an irrelevant intellectual abstraction from the concrete experiences and demands of mass movements, Wallis argues that the 'distinct project for the twenty-first century' is 'to constitute *both* a mass movement *and* a vanguard, with the latter accountable – structurally as well as organically – to the former' (34). But it is not always clear what the function of this vanguard is: Wallis emphasizes a vanguard party's 'pedagogical and interactive … power dimension' as a fomenter of collective power (91–93), while elsewhere claiming that a party is only needed

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'for the movement's self-protection' (119). Indeed, if decisions about potential threats can only be assessed retroactively – i.e., after the threat has been realized – then mechanisms of accountability become difficult to assess, no matter how institutionally or culturally embedded vanguards are in the broader movements over which they claim leadership.

In raising these thorny issues, *Socialist Practice* and *Auguste Blanqui and the Politics of Popular Empowerment* illuminate the key practical and theoretical challenges facing a twenty-first century socialist politics. Both books show that the renewed normative force of the idea of socialism in the English-speaking world brings with it the old ambivalences of previous centuries: do empowered anti-capitalist constituencies arise gradually or suddenly? What epistemic resources are required for the formation of such constituencies? How do they spread, and how do they interact with other political commitments? What are the strategic and ethical implications of different organizational forms in contributing to these processes? For the most part, neither book attempts to offer any strong answers to these questions, and neither is particularly convincing when it does. The overall message from both Wallis and Le Goff, though, is that such questions can only be worked out in practice – reading them together, one is left with an impression best captured in Blanqui's dictum that 'organization means victory; dispersal means death'.

References

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