

Three magazines: Ghosts of the New Left

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First Witch: When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch: When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

– *Macbeth*

THE LAUNCH OF *Sublation Magazine* is a response to the current moment of disorientation and depoliticization on the Left. Amid the support from “progressive” legislators such as “the squad” for the sclerotic Biden administration, the Left has nothing left to say on the latter’s catalogue of disasters, from censorship to Ukraine, for fear of agreeing with its only critics on the Right ahead of the 2022 midterms. The downturn at the end of neo-social democracy, which Platypus has been tracking since 2018, is gradually catching up with people.

In the past few years several new publications have emerged to which *Sublation* could be related. However, in an interview regarding the launch of *Sublation*, Sublation Media’s founder, Doug Lain, and the editor-in-chief of its online magazine, Spencer Leonard, proposed a triangulation between *Sublation*, *Compact*, and *Jacobin*.¹ This might not be the most obvious triangulation given the “conservative” nature of *Compact* and the established reputation of *Jacobin* as the flagship for Millennial socialism, but it raises some interesting questions.

The founding statements of the recently launched *Sublation* (May 2022) and *Compact* (March 2022), as well as the attempt to take stock of defeat in Bhaskar Sunkara’s *Jacobin* editorial “The Left in Purgatory” (February 2022), share many similarities.² Each tries in its own way to make sense of the dashed hope that Millennial socialism was going mainstream with Bernie Sanders, and to ask what will become — *for the Left* — of the intellectuals produced by the experience of recent history, from the anti-Iraq-war movement through to the deflation of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) bubble. In doing so all three more or less unconsciously recall an early moment in the history of the New Left, when intellectuals responded to the experience of defeat and disorientation following the crisis of Stalinism in 1956 by launching new magazines.

Sixty-five years ago, three other magazines — *Labour Review*, *Universities and Left Review*, and *New Reasoner* — sought to *sublate* the death of the Left in their time by fostering the debate and reflection that might take them beyond their immediate impasse. But they ended up accusing each other of simultaneously pursuing pseudo-novelty and dogmatism. As with the three magazines today, each saw the need for a

¹ The interview, which I will refer back to, is on Sublation Media’s YouTube in two parts: “Social Democracy and Compact Magazine (ft. Spencer Leonard)” (May 4, 2022), available at <youtu.be>, and “Understand the Death of the Left (ft. Spencer Leonard)” (May 19, 2022), available at <youtu.be>.

² See the “About” pages of *Sublation* (at <www.sublationmag.com>) and *Compact* (at <www.compactmag.com>), and Bhaskar Sunkara’s editorial “The Left in Purgatory,” *Jacobin* 44 (Winter 2022), available online at <www.jacobinmag.com>. Each magazine publishes a range of views, so I will be treating these editorials as symptomatic of the magazines’ orientations.

Left that was both new and recovered a lost tradition, and each accused its peers of repeating the impasse inherited from the past. The aim of this article is to critically recognize the repetition and regression of that problem in the contemporary triangulation.

Compact's founding statement carries over the project of founder-editor Edwin Aponte from his former publication *The Bellows*. The latter launched in May 2020 and at one time used the tagline "The Left is dead! Long live the Left!," which had been proposed as a critical slogan by Platypus in 2006, though Aponte clearly meant something different by it and has now moved "beyond Left and Right" with *Compact*.³ *Sublation*'s founding statement also bears the influence of Platypus, with its reference to Adorno's concept of "thought taboos."

Observing the present as a "crisis," as well as the exhaustion of neo-social democracy, Trotskyist sects, and academic Left publishing, *Sublation* wants to "actively forget" and "overcome" this past, to "make possible a new beginning for socialism or some credible heir to its aspirations." This echoes Platypus's statement of purpose, which declared in 2007: "*If the Left is to change the world, it must first transform itself!*" However, whereas Platypus invokes the "vanquished tradition" of Marxism, from Marx through Lenin to Adorno, *Sublation* invokes a vaguer notion of "socialism" or something like it.

In this sense, *Sublation* wants to sustain the moment where "socialism" was critical of "progressives" before and in the early phases of the Sanders/DSA project. This was explicit in the discussion between Lain and Leonard. They point out that *Jacobin*'s Bhaskar Sunkara had initially started out asking "salient questions" about the historical necessity of independent socialist parties. But they lament the fact that by 2015 he seemed to have turned to a more straightforward acceptance of a welfare-state delivered by a realignment of the Democrats. Sunkara himself shares some of these misgivings in his editorial. Prefiguring *Sublation*, Sunkara wrote that the Left faces "challenges that must be overcome to address past sins." Whereas *Sublation*'s editorial says that the apparent popularity of "'socialism' . . . seems only to have bolstered capitalist politics to meet the crisis of neoliberalism," Sunkara says, "I hope we won't conflate the cultural radicalism of recent times with real advance."

Compact and *Sublation* press home the case that *Jacobin* is indeed responsible for the defeat. Whereas *Jacobin* appears more like a closed party organ of the DSA and therefore unable to extricate itself from the impasse, *Compact* and *Sublation* present themselves as more open projects for rethinking accepted wisdom and prosecuting potential for different political paths. Aponte and Lain were both self-styled Marxists who supported Sanders but regretted his concessions to identity politics and anti-Trumpism, thus seeming to snub his working-class support that had initially aroused so much hope among the Left that they were breaking out of their decades-long isolation.

³ For the purposes of this article, I will treat *Compact* as a Left publication. "Beyond Left and Right" is its own kind of repetition. The interesting things it publishes will be Leftists trying to overcome the limitations of the existing Left or Right-wingers talking about traditionally Left-wing concerns.

Whereas *Compact* leans into the label “anti-woke,” *Sublation* wants to render the culture wars “symptomatic of defeat.” Nonetheless, Doug Lain would agree with *Compact*’s editorial that to be radical means going to the root of things and the root of things is “class, material realities.” (That’s not Marxism, but that’s a different story.)

Despite this agreement, *Compact* probably views *Sublation* as irremediably tied to the dead end of the Left. In some ways *Compact* states its political project more clearly and directly than *Sublation*. This is partly due to the former’s abandonment of the concept of the Left, which allows it to be more opportunist with respect to current trends, such as the much touted “realignment” expressed by Right-wing figures like Tucker Carlson, but not entirely: *Sublation* seems intentionally less political. In his interview with Lain, *Sublation*’s Spencer Leonard references the historical project of socialism in the Second International, appealing to the inquiries made in that direction by *Jacobin* in its early days. But *Sublation* is clearly different from new magazines like *Cosmonaut* and *Prometheus: A Journal for Socialism and Democracy*, which are much more direct about their project of building new mass socialist parties and recovering the history of the Second International for our time (however one may criticize their self-understanding in doing so).

Like *Jacobin*, *Sublation* probably wants to avoid the “sectarian” trappings of *Cosmonaut* and *Prometheus*, because it wants to be open to rethinking. *Sublation*’s founding statement avoids specific historical and political touchstones in favor of the more *Jacobin*-esque “socialism” and limits its historical purview to neoliberalism and its crisis. Perhaps this is because developing a line on history — the history of Marxism — would create fissures on its editorial board and inhibit the broad political range and dialogue it seeks to publish. This has extended to a wide range of differing claims to rethinking Marxism, both in the articles published so far and in interviews on Sublation Media.

Compact and *Jacobin* both also claim to host a range of perspectives regarding history and Marxism.⁴ They might agree that *Sublation*’s allusion to pre-WWI socialism fails to address the contemporary situation — which is not untrue, however much we might wish otherwise. *Compact* pulls *Jacobin* in a different direction than *Sublation* by appealing to its avowed New Deal welfare-statism, calling for “a strong social-democratic state.” In his critique of *Compact*, *Jacobin*’s Ben Burgis (who has also worked with *Sublation*’s Doug Lain) agreed with this aim of *Compact*, stating, “we’re enthusiastic about any step that takes us in the right direction.”⁵ Their disagreement is about culture wars and identity politics.

However, this seems less an ideological or historical dispute and more one of tactics. Burgis claims that the pro-welfare state but anti-woke electorate is negligible and that anti-neoliberal Republicans are not a reliable way to carry through said policies relative to the leverage that workers, particularly in unions, can wield inside the Democrats. In

⁴ See for example *Jacobin*’s Vivek Chibber on “How Capitalism Endures” in *Compact*, May 13, 2022, available online at <www.compactmag.com>.

⁵ Ben Burgis, “Stop Trying to Make Right-Wing Social Democracy Happen. It’s Not Going to Happen.,” *Jacobin*, March 23, 2022, available online at <www.jacobinmag.com>.

response, *Compact*'s Sohrab Ahmari pointed to *Jacobin*'s own polling, "Commonsense Solidarity" (a phrase that could have been in *Compact*'s founding statement), which "found that workers preferred progressive candidates who focus primarily on clear, economic issues, and who frame those issues in universal terms."⁶ Burgis took particular aim at Ahmari for apparently not supporting social inclusivity and labor unions, but Ahmari has written for *Compact* lauding the leading role blacks and women played in union organizing in the 1970s.⁷ Both seek to uphold "class" as opposed to "culture" and accuse each other of the inverse, but they both end up reducing the former to the latter.

Responding to this debate in his interview with Doug Lain, Spencer Leonard emphasized the Right-wing character of *Jacobin* and *Compact*'s shared welfare-state politics, with its emphasis on the state, community, and collectivism. Leonard invoked the persistence of bourgeois social relations in capitalism, as opposed to the slavery of state-dependency, as the basis on which earlier socialists once critiqued the welfare state: "Not a man, not a penny for this system." However, as has been pointed out, *Sublation* is not a magazine with a political line, whether neo-Kautskyan or otherwise, and it has to engage the same "class" and "culture" issues as the other two magazines. Thus, Lain and Leonard's discussion quickly turns to the territory claimed by both Burgis and Ahmari: the role of women and blacks in 1970s labor unions and the re-organization of the welfare state in neoliberalism. In this way, all three magazines understand themselves to be inheriting problems from the New Left.

Tasks inherited from the New Left are constitutive of the background and self-understanding of each magazine. *Jacobin*'s project can be understood as connecting the Millennial generation to the New Left by leapfrogging the doldrums of the 1980s. In so doing, they ended up returning to Michael Harrington's DSOC⁸ "realignment strategy" of the 1960s, combined with traditional 1960s movement-building activism. *Compact*'s avowed Right-wing social democracy recalls the related but different "realignment strategy" of Social Democrats, USA (like DSOC, a product of the collapse of the Socialist Party of America in 1972), which criticized the role of middle-class, anti-war, and identity-politics activists. Moreover, *Compact*'s rejection of "a libertine left and a libertarian right" in its editorial recalls terms used by French theorist Michel Clouscard in criticizing his fellow *soixante-huitards*.⁹ *Sublation*'s Doug Lain has written a novel about May 68 and is inspired by Guy Debord's Situationist International. He also has a background in the Marxist-Humanist tradition, which was aligned with the influential journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and tried to recover the Hegelian dimension of Marxism, perhaps inspiring the title *Sublation*.

⁶ Sohrab Ahmari, "The Many Agonies of Jacobin Magazine," *Compact*, April 21, 2022, available online at <www.compactmag.com>.

⁷ Sohrab Ahmari, "How America Kneecapped its Unions," *Compact*, March 31, 2022, available online at <compactmag.com>.

⁸ Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee.

⁹ 1968ers.

More importantly, however, the triangulation between *Sublation*, *Compact*, and *Jacobin* revolves around two antinomies inherited from an earlier moment in the New Left: socialism and statism, class and culture. In an open debate over these antinomies between 1957 and 1960, three British magazines — *Labour Review*, *Universities and Left Review*, and *New Reasoner* — attempted to extricate themselves from the impasse of the Left in their time. However, they soon hit a deeper problem, which our contemporary triangulation is less conscious of. While they all acknowledged the need to overcome the “dead hand of the past,” each accused the others of remaining beholden to that past precisely in their attempts to start anew. The aims and recriminations of each were legitimate. Their attempts to “actively forget” the impasse of Stalinism and social democracy landed them back in old problems. The consciousness of this was too much to bear and the open exchange and rethinking broke down on all sides. An American socialist reporting in 1958 on these debates in Britain noted that this problem arose “not necessarily from personal failings, but the intrinsic difficulty of the times.”¹⁰

Labour Review was launched in January 1957 by members of the Club, the British section of the Fourth International, yet it promised not to be a “sectional, Trotskyist journal.” Rather it aimed to open a space for “all those who honestly wish to develop Marxism.”¹¹ Their first editorial welcomed “the end of the Ice Age” of Stalinism and social democracy: “All sorts of tendencies are emerging, with scars from the past, perhaps, but with bright hopes for the future.”¹² *New Reasoner* was launched that summer by recent Communist Party exile Edward Thompson. Like *Labour Review*, which welcomed the new publication, *New Reasoner* criticized both the Stalinist CPGB and the Labour Left led by *Tribune*.¹³ Both magazines laid emphasis on recovering the necessity for theoretical discussion. Intellectuals who had recently left the Communist Party, like Brian Pearce, Peter Fryer, and Alasdair MacIntyre, wrote for both *New Reasoner* and *Labour Review*.

The theoretical discussion immediately turned to how to understand Stalinism and anti-Stalinism. For both *Labour Review* and *New Reasoner* recovering Marxism meant recovering the “subjective factor” in history, to reassert the potential for working-class revolution in major capitalist countries, which had been repressed in favor of “the

¹⁰ Bert Cochran, “New Horizons for European Socialism,” *American Socialist* (January 1958), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

¹¹ The degeneration of the Club’s successors, Socialist Labour League and Workers’ Revolutionary Party, under Gerry Healy can make these claims seem laughable. But we shouldn’t laugh, if we want to seriously consider the real tasks and possibilities they faced, which were blocked not by the tyrannies of one man but deeper historical problems.

¹² “Introducing *Labour Review*,” *Labour Review* 2, no. 1 (January 1957), available online at <www.marxists.org>. Volume 1 of this magazine had a different character and only ran five issues before 1955. Volume 2 was the launch of a new concept for the magazine.

¹³ Ironically, under the proprietorship of Bhaskar Sunkara, the Millennials have revived *Tribune* as the British *Jacobin*, despite the fact that overcoming the rotten legacy of *Tribune* had been a defining task for all tendencies in the New Left.

objective process” by the Stalinist Communist Party and Labour bureaucracy, as well as the Pabloite tendencies in the Fourth International. Both magazines saw the Stalinist bureaucracy — as well as the Labour bureaucracy — as inherently unstable, contra the growing tendency to view them as converging on a new managerial society. Both agreed that Stalinism was a product of the failure of world revolution leading to isolation, and both sought to grasp not “two systems” but how global capitalism was reinforced by Stalinism and vice versa.

However, in his famous essay “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” Thompson laid more emphasis on the backwards character of Russia in 1917, suggesting that the bureaucracy had a necessary function in developing “the wealth of society and . . . the cultural horizons of the people.”¹⁴ Thompson explained that the success of that process by the 1950s had made the bureaucracy redundant, delegitimizing the argument for “objective” over “subjective” factors, leading to the upsurge in “humanist” opposition in Eastern Europe. In a response to Thompson’s essay, *Labour Review* editors wrote that it was unnecessary for Thompson’s argument for him to make “the concession that the horrors of Stalinism . . . were inevitable, or that they had a ‘progressive aspect.’” *Labour Review* emphasized the role of the Soviet masses — not the state bureaucracy — in the “expansion of the forces of production.” “The job could have been done with far greater fruit and far less suffering,” if the revolution had followed the Bolshevik model of worker control and “developing socialist revolution in advanced countries.”¹⁵

For *Labour Review*, Thompson was ignoring the questions posed by Trotsky in the 20s and 30s, thus rendering the historical defeat inevitable and foreclosing possibilities in the present. For them, Thompson’s moral critique of Stalinism failed to address these older problems and, far from recovering subjective agency, made a necessity out of an apparently “objective” development. For Thompson, on the other hand, *Labour Review*’s Trotskyism was just the flip-side of Stalinist dogmatism, because as a “a self-consistent ideology” it followed “economic behaviourism” rather than responding to new circumstances.¹⁶ He thought they were trying to repeat the past rather than explain the crisis in the present. He later called the Socialist Labour League (SLL) “the newest offspring of the Old Left.”¹⁷ *New Reasoner* and *Labour Review* both accused each other of claiming to be new and different but actually falling back into Stalinism.¹⁸

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

¹⁵ “Rejected by New Reasoner,” *Labour Review* 3, no. 3 (May–June 1958), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

¹⁶ Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, “The New Left,” *New Reasoner* 9 (Summer 1959), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

¹⁸ There was a philosophical dimension to this debate, which is beyond the scope of this essay and dealt with the relationship between Hegel and Marxism via Lenin. It is interesting to note that the question of Hegel and philosophy has repeated in the collapse of the Millennial Left during the

Stuart Hall, who launched his new magazine *Universities and Left Review* in spring 1957, was probably thinking that this kind of debate was typical of the Old Left he was trying to break with. While he sympathized more with Thompson's "socialist humanism," questions about the nature of the Soviet Union and why Stalinism arose were of less interest to him. He was more interested in the Suez crisis, which had discredited both Labour and Conservatives, and what it meant for the "apathy" of the masses under Conservative political dominance. Hall would have earnestly cast himself among "those who honestly wish to develop Marxism," as *Labour Review* had called for. Surely, he thought, this meant understanding capitalism today and thus reconceptualizing socialism. For Hall, the post-war social-democratic welfare state had produced a society of apathy, alienation, and "a sense of classlessness."¹⁹ To overcome the impasse of Stalinism and social democracy — which he commonly understood as "state bureaucracy" — socialists needed to develop a broader critique of culture that was adequate to the problems of new sociological analyses, away from the traditional institutions and economic determinism of old.

Thompson warned Hall that the articles in *ULR*, with their focus on culture, alienation, and critique of the welfare state, were arousing suspicion among older activists on the Left: "These *ULR* types . . . are angrier about ugly architecture than they are about the ugly poverty of old-age pensioners . . . They wear upon their sleeves a tender sensibility; but probe that tenderness, and one finds a complex of responses which the veteran recognises as 'anti-working-class.'" Whereas Thompson wanted to recover the subjective agency of the working class from the twin obstacles of Stalinism and social democracy, he felt that Hall fell back into the old problem by viewing them as "pliant *recipients* of the imprint of the mass media, as *victims* of alienation, as *data* for sociological enquiry" and thus evaded "that impolite historical concept — the class struggle."²⁰ A similar point was made by Cliff Slaughter in his response to Hall's "A Sense of Classlessness" in *Labour Review*: "You can define the working class by any number of formal characteristics; it defines itself historically by the development of its organization and struggle against the bourgeoisie."²¹

Thompson further specified his critique of Hall regarding history: "I think we are lacking, chiefly, in a sense of history . . . I am asking not only for a sense of history, but for a sense of the dialectics of social change."²² While he was sympathetic to Hall's investigations into the cultural landscape as a means to renewal on the Left, he wanted Hall to remember that mass culture existed already in the 19th century

aftermath of neo-social democracy. See "Hegel and the Left," *Platypus Review* 138 (July–August 2021), available online at <platypus1917.org>.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, "A Sense of Classlessness," *Universities and Left Review* 5 (Autumn 1958).

²⁰ E. P. Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," *Universities and Left Review* 6 (Spring 1959).

²¹ Cliff Slaughter, "The 'New Left' and the Working Class," *Labour Review* 4, no. 2 (July–August 1959), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

²² Thompson, "Commitment in Politics."

when working-class socialism began.²³ Hall, however, found the comparison between the 20th and 19th centuries to be “phony” and a way of avoiding the problem of contemporary mass media.²⁴ Responding to the debate in *Labour Review*, Gerry Healy echoed Thompson’s point: “The new left of today cannot separate itself by an effort of will from the history of the working-class movement.”²⁵ However, Healy had in mind Thompson’s own historical amnesia, which cast the Left Book Clubs of the 1930s Popular Front in a nostalgic light, using them as a model for the New Left. For Healy, the 30s had been not a high point, but a downturn following the defeat of the general strike in 1926, which led intellectuals to seek a “short cut” through “class collaboration.”²⁶ The repetition of this pattern in the late 50s, Healy thought, ignored the fact that “the working-class movement . . . has fully recovered from the defeat of 1926” and was heading to a new upsurge.²⁷ Hall, not unreasonably, thought that Healy was a purveyor of “mindless militancy.”²⁸

For Hall, “There is no point talking in 1959 as if the last example of socialism that we know was the Paris Commune.”²⁹ But this was an ambiguous statement. What example of socialism would Hall like to point to? *Labour Review* had already called out Thompson in 1957 for claiming that “The Soviet Union is a socialist country.”³⁰ While emphasizing the difference between Hall’s sociology of mass society and Thompson’s romantic socialism, those at *Labour Review* suspected that politically they shared at best a reformism that echoed the Popular Front — at worst a technocratic Labourism. Thompson’s view of the Soviet Union was mirrored by his view of the changes wrought by the “peaceful revolution” of 1945. This was specified by his wife Dorothy, who argued in *New Reasoner* that the welfare state institutions were “objectively victories for working-class values within capitalist society,” evidence that “new values can always be seen growing within the old.”³¹ While Hall was more circumspect about those institutions and their role in the culture of “apathy,” he also developed this notion, following the non-Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams, of “working-class values”

²³ The efforts of all parts of this New Left triangulation to rewrite the history of the Left were immense, from Brian Pearce’s essays on the history of the Communist Party to Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*, and markedly absent among the Millennial Left.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Big Swipe,” *Universities and Left Review* 7 (Autumn 1959).

²⁵ Gerry Healy, “The ‘New Left’ Must Look to the Working Class,” *Labour Review* 4, no. 3 (October–November 1959), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

²⁶ From a different perspective, in *Parliamentary Socialism* (1960) Ralph Miliband also observed how the 1930s had become a myth for Leftists in the late 1950s: “It is today commonly believed, inside the Labour movement and outside, that the Labour Party underwent a kind of socialist renaissance after 1931 . . . The evidence shows all this to be a very dubious history. The experience of 1931 did not cause any major transformations in the Labour Party. Nor did mass unemployment. Nor did Fascism.”

²⁷ Healy, “The ‘New Left’ Must Look.”

²⁸ Hall, “The Big Swipe.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”

³¹ Dorothy Thompson, “Discussion: The Welfare State,” *New Reasoner* 4 (Spring 1958), available online at <banmarchive.org.uk>.

and “community” resisting “bourgeois” or “mainstream” values, and pointing the way to a new society. A *ULR* editorial thus argued for “some alternative image of human and community relationships,” concluding, “we have begun already to sow the seeds of the new society.”³²

Cliff Slaughter wrote in *Labour Review* that this “concern for ‘socialism in the here and now’” manifested “a confinement to the horizons of what Birnbaum calls the ‘administrative technologist’ who lives by manipulating things-as-they-are.”³³ For Marxists, on the other hand, the working class, unlike the rise of bourgeois society in feudalism, “does not have a method of appropriation which it develops under capitalism . . . because it possesses none of the means of production, cannot achieve freedom without overthrowing the whole economic and political system.”³⁴ The consequences of Hall and Thompson’s prefigurative politics “soon become in fact a support for capitalism, a retreat from the primary tasks of the working class and its intellectuals.”³⁵ For *Labour Review*, both *New Reasoner* and *ULR*, precisely in their claims to be new, had simply continued the Fabian reformism of the Labour Party and the Stalinist “British Road to Socialism.”

Hall responded that Slaughter’s argument was “a simple piece of Stalinism, where the critics of the ‘regime’ become, by a metaphysical sleight-of-hand, ‘objectively’ the class enemy . . . I believe that, until we can relate the concept of the ‘class struggle’ to other forms of work as well as industry, we shall never link the different aspects of the struggle into a movement.”³⁶ As much as they were right about Hall’s revisionism, the Trotskyists were unable to meet that challenge, proving Hall prophetic when he wrote: “The gravest danger in the coming years could be that we fail to make socialists, and yet have ‘success’ in building another socialist sect.”³⁷ Gerry Healy responded in *Labour Review*: “The most dangerous trend in the new left will be to attack the Marxists in the hope of accommodating more easily to all sorts of pseudo-left-wingers thrown up by the oncoming crisis in the Labour movement.”³⁸ Both their fears came true. Their attempts to “overcome” the past had presented them with images of repetition.

Slaughter maintained in 1959 that he was open to an “outspoken debate” and “joint research on present-day problems” with *ULR* and *New Reasoner*.³⁹ But Hall felt this was in bad faith and called Slaughter’s article “a hatchet job.”⁴⁰ Tensions were already high in 1957 when *New Reasoner* refused to publish *Labour Review*’s open letter. By late 1959, many ex-Communists who had joined *Labour Review* were defecting from the

³² Editorial, *Universities and Left Review* 5 (Autumn 1958).

³³ Slaughter, “The ‘New Left’ and the Working Class.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hall, “The Big Swipe.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Healy, “The ‘New Left’ Must Look.”

³⁹ Slaughter, “The ‘New Left’ and the Working Class.”

⁴⁰ Hall, “The Big Swipe.”

newly formed Socialist Labour League, seeming to confirm Thompson's suspicion that Slaughter and Healy were at best sectarian and at worst engaging in gangsterism and intimidation of dissent. Despite this, writers for all three magazines participated in the "socialist forums" of 1957 and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with its famous Aldermaston marches into the early 60s. They were all participating in the Labour Party too, though they had different understandings of that work. Hall and Thompson both decried Labour's decision to proscribe the SLL as "bureaucratic barbarism,"⁴¹ which forced Healy to embrace the form of an open sect that *Labour Review* had once wanted to avoid. *Labour Review* was wound up in 1964, perhaps leaving as its only legacy Cliff Slaughter's 1960 essay "What is Revolutionary Leadership?," which was clearly motivated by his debate with Hall and Thompson over the prior two years.⁴²

But Hall and Thompson didn't fare much better. Healy pointed out, not unreasonably, that *New Reasoner* and *ULR* did have organizational forms but refused to take responsibility for them. Far from democratic, they were "very tightly and narrowly controlled."⁴³ Only a year after they merged to form *New Left Review* in 1960, Hall stepped down as editor over major disagreements about the direction of the New Left clubs and the magazine. Rather than making political differences explicit, the fall out was conducted through "discreet conventicles and duplicated factional documents."⁴⁴ This crisis and split precipitated the takeover of the editorial board by a younger generation led by Perry Anderson, who moved the magazine away from the concern of building a new socialist movement in Britain and towards third-world revolutions and more academic Marxology. Even before then, the *New Left Review* took on the role of publishing policy advice to the Labour Party, and had high hopes for Harold Wilson's leadership in the run-up to the 1964 general election. Already in 1963, Thompson wrote: "[The New Left] failed to implement our original purposes, or even to sustain what cultural apparatus we had. What purposes the review which now bears its name will fulfil remains to be seen."⁴⁵

New Left Review lives to this day as a tombstone marking the missed possibilities for overcoming obstacles to Marxism and socialism in the late 50s. Its attempt

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Cliff Slaughter, "What is Revolutionary Leadership?," *Labour Review* 5, no. 3 (October–November 1960), available online at <www.marxists.org>. For example: "the proletariat does not construct the institutions of the new society within capitalism (despite the Fabians and the New Left)," and "After the Khrushchev exposures of 1956 certain prominent 'New Left' ex-Communists said quite explicitly that Russia had dominated the Left for too long and that in [the] future we should concentrate on contemporary British problems. There were only jeers for those who wanted to know 'what Trotsky said in 1924', and yet without a study of the social roots of Stalinism, rather than the horrified turning of one's back on it, there could be no renewal of Marxism."

⁴³ Healy, "The 'New Left' Must Look."

⁴⁴ Peter Sedgwick, "The Two New Lefts," *International Socialism* (1st series) 17 (August 1964), available online at <www.marxists.org>.

⁴⁵ E. P. Thompson, "C. Wright Mills: The Responsible Craftsman," *Peace News*, November 22 and 29, 1963.

to shake off the “sectarianism” of *Labour Review* prefigures the Millennials’ pseudo-overcoming of Trotskyism. Publishing mostly academics rather than dissident party members (Trotskyist or Stalinist), combining Hall’s cultural analysis with Anderson’s botched account of “Western Marxism,” and producing “progressive” policy advice to Labour, it continues to be the unavoidable model for all Left-wing magazines.

The antinomies that broke down attempts to sublimate the impasse of the post-56 Left — socialism and statism, class and culture — are prominent in the agreements and disagreements across our contemporary triangulation. A sample of *Sublation*’s first few articles displays the legacy and tension of all three magazines from the 50s. Alfie Bown’s “Against Anti-Fascist Football” continues the *ULR* legacy of examining “culture” and “community.”⁴⁶ Teo Velissaris recalls the Marxism of *Labour Review* contra Stalinism and social democracy when he writes, “It is commonly thought today that Marxism regards the existing state apparatus as neutral and, thus, as amenable to socialist ambitions. But Lenin in his *State and Revolution* praises Marx and Engels for grasping the experience of the Paris Commune, that it showed that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.’”⁴⁷ And Omair Hussain, in trying to understand the relation between Marxist “class theory” and contemporary “apathy,” sounds like Thompson (and not without a hint of his romanticism) trying to navigate between *ULR*’s liberal culture critique and *Labour Review*’s “dogmatism”: “To be a proletarian today means to take responsibility for society and history by recognizing that these phenomena are not foreign objects to be contemplated and classified, but the sites of a battle for a world that must be won through political struggle.”⁴⁸ However, despite the repetition of neo-social democracy and neo-Stalinism today, there are no neat analogies with the past here — only ghosts, which one wants to overcome.

In one of the last issues of *New Reasoner*, Thompson wrote that “the regeneration of the Western socialist movement cannot take place without a fundamental break with the policies and orthodoxies of the past decade.”⁴⁹ Few on the Left today would disagree — but how? Whether discussing socialism and statism or class and culture, the early New Left shows our contemporary triangulation that breaking with, or even sublimating, the past is a tricky business — and deeper regression since Thompson’s time has only made the problem of the relationship between the old and the new more obscure. We should consider the potential in that early New Left moment, rather than consigning it to “what was,” and thereby recognize that the attempt to break with the past is

⁴⁶ Alfie Bown, “Against Anti-Fascist Football,” *Sublation*, May 18, 2022, available online at <www.sublationmag.com>.

⁴⁷ Teo Velissaris, “The State and the Ruling Class,” *Sublation*, May 20, 2022, available online at <www.sublationmag.com>.

⁴⁸ Omair Hussain, “The Poverty of Philosophy: What Class Might Mean Today,” *Sublation*, May 19, 2022, available online at <www.sublationmag.com>.

⁴⁹ Thompson, “The New Left.”

itself a repetition. Such recognition is necessary if we are to consider, as the *Sublation* editorial asks, “whether the crisis of our time might yet prove an opportunity.” **P**

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