

The Marxism of Leo Panitch

Leo Panitch emphasized three core themes throughout his career: the process of class formation, the key role of political parties in facilitating this process, and the need to transform the state instead of wielding it in its current form. In doing so, he gave the democratic-socialist movement an invaluable trove of resources to change the world with.



Leo Panitch, (1945–2020).

Ralph Miliband begins his classic book, [*Marxism and Politics*](#), with the striking observation that no major figure in the Marxist tradition, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves, offered a systematic elaboration of Marxist political theory. For Miliband, this glaring absence could be explained by the ambivalent position Marxists typically assigned to politics in their conceptions of social life in class societies. Paradoxically, the pervasiveness of conflict, and hence politics, in Marxist thought tended to drain the formal political sphere of its specificity and autonomy from other areas of social life.

“This very pervasiveness of politics,” Miliband argues, “seems to make it less susceptible to particular treatment, save in the purely formal description of processes and institutions which Marxists have precisely wanted to avoid.”

In its most extreme forms, this tendency can collapse the distinction between politics and economics, as in the idea that political actors are simply bearers of objective, preexisting interests, without any autonomy of their own — an idea which, in turn, requires a questionable concept like “false consciousness” to

explain why working people often fail to fight for *their* own interests in the real world.

The mirror image of this conception is the sharp separation of economics and politics into expressions of “base” and “superstructure,” respectfully. Marxism is not a form of economic determinism, as its critics sometimes allege. But it is undeniable that certain key texts in the Marxian canon, including Marx’s 1859 [Preface](#) to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, lend themselves to such a reading.

Marxist theory is right to treat the economic system as the starting point for understanding the “laws of motion” of a given society. But Miliband was also correct to observe how rightly emphasizing the mode of production “resulted, in relation to social analysis and notwithstanding ritual denegations concerning ‘economic determinism,’ in a marked ‘economism’ in Marxist thought.”



Ralph Miliband.

This tendency led to the severe underdevelopment of realistic strategies for moving toward socialism under conditions of advanced capitalism and liberal democracy. For many socialists, it also licensed an unconvincing utopianism concerning the “withering away” of the state and the transcendence of politics in a postcapitalist society. As Miliband concluded, “the assumption commonly made by Marxists before 1917 that the socialist revolution would itself — given the kind of overwhelming popular movement it would be — resolve the main political problems presented to it” persisted well into the twentieth century and was not limited to the currents that explicitly identified with the Bolshevik Revolution’s legacy.

The sadly departed Leo Panitch was one of Miliband’s most brilliant students.

Together with his close friend and collaborator Sam Gindin, Panitch built on Miliband's work to develop a Marxism that was fundamentally political that sought to [avoid the pitfalls](#) of both Leninism and social democracy. Like the "[Political Marxism](#)" of Ellen Meiksins Wood and Robert Brenner, Panitch emphasized the role of political agency and conflict in understanding the dynamics of social development. Unlike Wood and Brenner, however, his main focus was not analyzing capitalism's historical origins, but asking how the working-class movement could develop its capacity to exercise political power in pursuit of democratic-socialist transformation.

To that end, Panitch emphasized three core themes throughout his decades of intellectual and practical work: the process of class formation, the key role of political parties in facilitating this process, and the need to transform the state instead of either "smashing" it or attempting to wield it in its current form. In doing so, he and his collaborators gave the democratic-socialist movement an invaluable trove of resources to help us think through and act on the central challenges we face today.

Not Automatic: The Process of Class Formation

Panitch's Marxism began at the beginning, [The Communist Manifesto](#) of 1848. Specifically, it flowed from Marx's and Engels's crucial but often overlooked proposition that the immediate aim of the socialist movement is the formation of the proletariat into a class. Such a formulation implies that classes are not simply objective economic categories but, as Adam Przeworski [put it](#), the "effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological."

Class, in this conception, is a *process* and not a *thing*, which in turn means that class formation is never linear nor complete. Classes in capitalist society are continually organized, disorganized, and reorganized across space and time. "Rather than sorting workers into different class fractions according to their occupational position, the challenge is 'how to visualize and develop the potential of new forms of working-class organization and formation in the twenty-first century.'"

Panitch's conception of class bears the clear influence of the great British Marxist historians of the mid-twentieth century, particularly E. P. Thompson and his monumental study [The Making of the English Working Class](#). In his Preface to the book, Thompson defines class as "an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is an *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a

‘category,’ but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.”

Class, in this view, is not simply given to us by the abstract mechanisms of the economic system, but is made and remade through conscious human action and interaction.



E. P. Thompson speaking to anti-nuclear weapons protesters in 1980.

(Wikimedia Commons)

Thompson arguably went too far in denying the structural and objective aspects of the class system, and Panitch did not view class as an essentially subjective or discursive phenomenon. But the subjective thrust of Thompson’s Marxism clearly made an imprint on Panitch’s ideas about class formation, something that comes through perhaps most clearly in “[The Impasse of Social Democratic Politics](#),” his masterful polemic against Eric Hobsbawm and the “New Times” trend in British communism associated with the journal *Marxism Today*.

Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 election victory sent the British left in search of explanations for why the Tories were not just able to defeat Labour at the polls, but to inaugurate a hegemonic project that broke with the “welfarist” consensus of postwar Britain. As the Sri Lankan–British Marxist A. Sivanandan [described it](#), the New Times school argued the Labour Party and the Left in general “was too sunk in its own stupor of trade unionism to see that the working class was decomposing under the impact of the new forces of production and that old forms of Labour organisation were becoming frangible.”

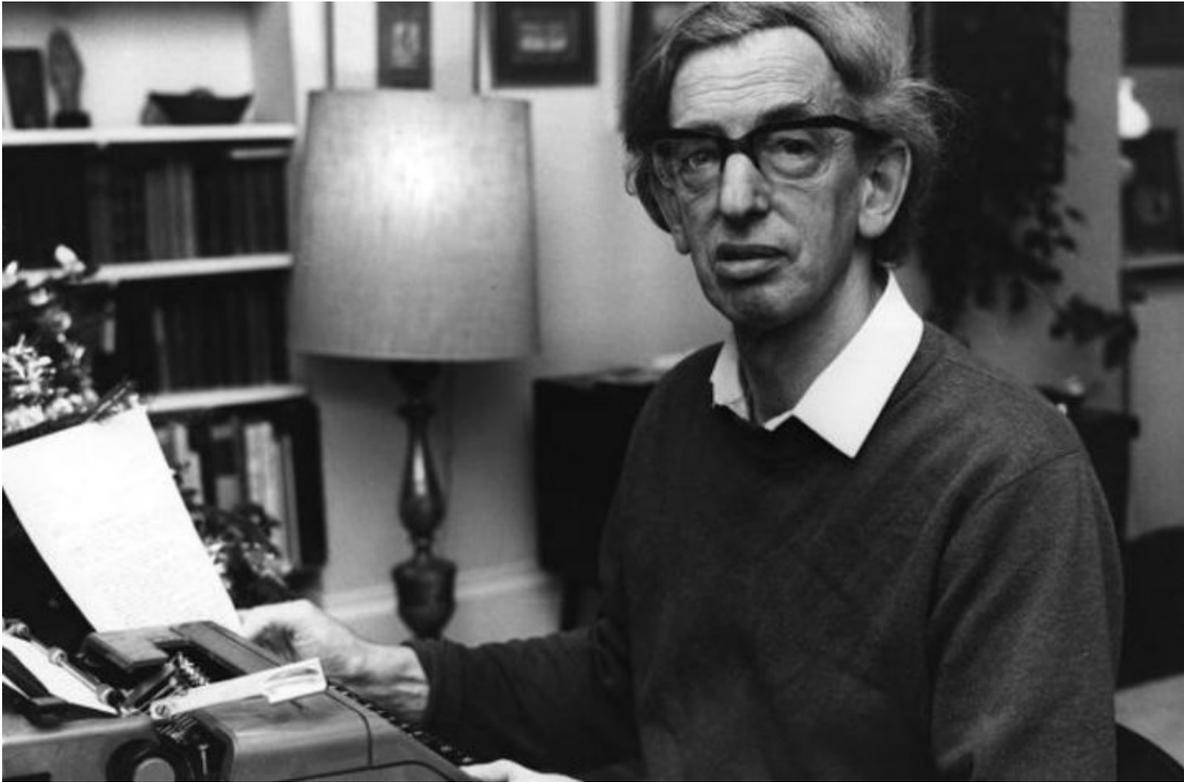
As economic life shifted from industry to services and from production to consumption, the Left and the labor movement had to change along with it or be

swept into the dustbin of history. With the industrial working class subject to irreversible numerical decline, all of the movement's traditional institutions and values had to be brought into question.

Thatcherism, according to the New Times theorists, tapped into a deep longing for individuality and choice against the stifling uniformity of the welfare state, a trend that would only deepen as the ranks of the industrial working class, along with the organizational and cultural practices it created over the decades, continued to erode.

Panitch was by no means an uncritical defender of the "old" labor movement and its political orientation. In "Impasse," he criticizes the practice of social-democratic and labor parties precisely because of their stubborn attachment to traditional forms of class politics, not least of which was the stultifying influence of "social-democratic centralism" on party life. Panitch agreed that the crisis of postwar social democracy meant that the left-wing parties and labor movements of the advanced capitalist countries had to transform themselves to avoid an irreversible spiral of decline.

What he objected to, though, was the "sociological reductionism" of Hobsbawm and his co-thinkers, who "proclaim the 'decline of the working class' on the basis of trends in occupational structure of cultural homogenization." While working-class politics was indeed in crisis, the explanation for this state of affairs had to be located to a significant extent in the practices of the working-class movement itself. Here we see the influence of Thompson, who argued that "the finest-meshed sociological net" — a metaphor Panitch would [return to](#) throughout his career — "cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or love."



Eric Hobsbawm. (Wikimedia Commons)

For Panitch, labor's defeat amid the global capitalist crisis of the 1970s only reinforced the basic premises of socialist politics: "There is nothing automatic about the development of socialist consciousness when the capitalist economy is not generating material benefits or job security for the working class." In his view, Hobsbawm and others indulged in a crude determinism when they moved from changes in the economic and occupational structure directly to popular electoral realignments, without bringing political parties into the analysis as a mediating influence. By assuming that socioeconomic changes in themselves created the impasse of social democratic politics, they failed to grasp how tenuous the collective class identities created during the labor movement's formative period actually were.

From here, it may be tempting to embrace the arguments of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who also argued against sociological and economic reductionism in their pivotal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau and Mouffe argued that the plurality and complexity of capitalist society made Marxist conceptions of class politics obsolete, and that the labor movement should therefore be demoted from its "privileged" position to just one struggle among many in a kaleidoscopic movement for "radical democracy." Panitch did not reject the genuine insights of theorists like Laclau and Mouffe on the importance of ideology and discourse in forming political subjects, and he shared their perspective that people's identities do not necessarily have anything

to do with their particular location in the relations of economic production. Where they falter, Panitch argued, is in their idea that all potential collective subjects or identities have equivalent political or strategic weight. They fail to recognize that the salience of relations of production provides great potential, by virtue of their central place in the constitution of social arrangements in general as well as their inherently exploitative and hence contradictory and conflictual character, for struggles about and around the formation of class subjects; and that in turn the possibility of realizing a socialist project cannot conceivably do without working-class identity, consciousness and politics forming its mass base and organizational core. This is not only because of the potential size of a collectivity that draws on those who occupy subordinate positions in production relations, but again because of the centrality of such a collectivity to the constitutive principle of the whole social order. If the issue is in fact social transformation, the supersession of capitalism as a system, then the mobilization of the working class's potential range and power is the key organizational and ideological condition. It is hardly sufficient, but it *is* necessary.

Since Panitch launched his polemic against those who, in the words of André Gorz, bid “[farewell to the working class](#),” the processes of class formation that brought workers at least partially out of a state of permanent precarity have gone further into reverse. Working classes have been thoroughly reshaped and restructured by forty years of neoliberalism to the point where the project at hand is not so much class formation as re-formation. How do you put a cracked egg back together again?

In their 2017 *Socialist Register* essay “[Class, Party and the Challenge of State Transformation](#),” Panitch and Gindin contend that considering the extent of working-class disorganization today, there is limited value in “drawing new sociological nets” — Thompson, again — “of who is or is not in the working class.” In that sense, the often-heated debates over the place of the so-called [professional-managerial class](#) on the Left distract from more salient issues. Rather than sorting workers into different class fractions according to their occupational position, they argue, the challenge is “how to visualize and develop the potential of new forms of working-class organization and formation in the twenty-first century.”

Here is where the second major theme of Panitch's Marxism, the indispensable organizing role of political parties, comes into the picture.

Parties Organize Classes

The trade union is the most elemental form of workers' organization. Wherever

you find capitalist exploitation, you will also find trade unions or something like them. They represent the most immediate material interests of their members and are the main vehicle through which class struggle is waged on a daily basis under capitalism.

Despite their importance, however, unions are severely limited by their scope and function. They represent a particular group of workers who share a particular employer and have a particular set of related interests. In other words, while unions emerge *from* the working class, they *do not and cannot represent the working class as a whole*, only a section of it.

“A working-class party worthy of the name had to develop the capacity of its members to exercise power through collective participation in party life and an ongoing process of political education. Parties organize classes, not the other way around.”

While they were able to make meaningful material gains for masses of workers in much of the twentieth century, today they are in a deep state of crisis across advanced capitalist countries. As Sam Gindin has [concluded](#), “trade unions as they now exist no longer appear capable of adequately responding to the scale of the problems working classes face — whether the arena of struggle is the workplace, the bargaining table, the community, electoral politics or ideological debate.”

Historically, the main organizational vehicle for organizing the proletariat into a class has been the mass working-class political party. As Panitch argued in “Impasse,” the party is the mediating factor that makes it possible to create a collective subject called the working class out of the mass of individual working people. The basic role of a party, according to Panitch, is the “reinforcement, recomposition, and extension of class identity and community itself in the face of a capitalism which continually deconstructed and reconstructed industry, occupation, and locale.”

This conception of political parties and their purpose goes far beyond mainstream political science definitions, which tend to reduce parties to little more than competing teams of office seekers. For Panitch, a working-class party worthy of the name had to develop the capacity of its members to exercise power through collective participation in party life and an ongoing process of political education. Parties organize classes, not the other way around.

Panitch elaborated on this proposition in his [review](#) of [Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism](#) by Przeworski and John Sprague. There, he unpacked this proposition into three different parts.

First, by virtue of their location in the relations of production, workers are likely to engage in conflict along class lines. Second, the efforts of socialist parties to

mobilize such conflicts into the political arena “actually does much of the work of organizing workers in the social force we call the working class.” And third, because political parties operate at a broader level than trade unions, they have the capacity to organize political identities that encompass the entire working class, not just a section of it — which means they also have the potential “to go to the very heart of a challenge to capitalist hegemony, which is necessarily founded on a denial of the salience of class.”

Capitalism may have brought a mass of proletarians into existence, but it did not automatically create a working class. Class formation is something only parties can achieve in their role as articulators of a collective working-class political identity.

Panitch investigated the ways parties organize classes not primarily through a theoretical lens, but through a decades-long engagement with the political and organizational practices of the British Labour Party. In his 1970 essay “[Ideology and Integration: The Case of the British Labour Party](#),” he argued against the idea, commonly articulated on the Labour left, that the party had strayed from its roots as a working-class party.

According to Panitch, while Labour may have been launched by the trade unions and supported largely by working-class voters, this in itself did not make it a working-class party. On the contrary: since its inception, Labour “has been aggregative and has minimized the party’s class role” in favor of a politics dedicated to the “national interest” — a tendency that, in an amusing twist of fate, found one of its clearest expressions in Ed Miliband’s “[One Nation Labourism](#).”

In Panitch’s view, the critical element in Labour’s ideology wasn’t so much its dedication to parliamentary methods, as important as this was, but “its rejection of a certain view of the working class and its role in history,” namely the idea that the working class should become the ruling class. As such, the failure of the Labour governments to make serious attempts to follow through on the party’s formal commitment to socialism spoke less to an ostensible transformation of the party than continuity with its most fundamental tendencies.

For much of his career, Panitch shared Ralph Miliband’s [conclusion](#) that belief in the possibility of turning the Labour Party into an effective instrument of socialist politics “is the most crippling of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been prone.” In his 1979 essay “[Socialists and the Labour Party: A Reappraisal](#),” Panitch chided the Labour left for doing “their bit to sustain Labourism’s strangling hegemony over the politically active working class” and asked whether it was time for British socialists to launch a new party in the 1980s.

Despite his sometimes sharp criticisms, however, Panitch was sympathetic to the dogged efforts of the Labour left to democratize the party and deepen its commitment to the process of working-class formation. Above all, he admired and consistently defended the Labour New Left's unlikely standard-bearer: [Tony Benn](#).



Tony Benn.

Benn was born in Westminster, the son of a viscount, Royal Air Force officer, and Liberal-Labour politician. He served as the postmaster general and minister of technology in Harold Wilson's deeply disappointing 1964 Labour government. Benn's experiences in the first Wilson government radicalized him and made him see the need for a different kind of Labour Party aimed at carrying through a thorough transformation of the British state. In [Searching for Socialism: The Project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn](#), Panitch and Colin Leys trace the long and difficult path of Benn and the movement around him, which was dedicated to the proposition Benn most clearly articulated in 1973: "Our long campaign to democratise power in Britain has, first, to begin in our own movement."

From the Thatcher era to the end of New Labour, Benn and groups like the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and the Socialist Campaign Group fought to make parliamentarians and ministers accountable to the base and give both rank-and-file Labour members and social movement activists outside the party a meaningful role in developing and implementing party

policy — all with an eye toward making “the parliamentary system serve the people rather than the vanity of the Parliamentarians.”

Benn and the Labour New Left also linked the issue of party democracy to union democracy, which grated on union leaders unaccustomed to the kinds of criticisms Benn was not afraid to air in public. As Panitch and Leys somewhat delicately put it, “For a Labour politician to tread onto the sensitive ground of the defects of the unions’ internal organizational structure, let alone their economism, was dangerous indeed.”

Much of this criticism was directed at the way union leaders wielded block votes at Labour Party conferences, by which one union leader would cast thousands of votes on behalf of all the union’s party members. While Benn and the Labour New Left supported the unions in their battles against the wage-restraint policies of Tory and Labour governments alike, they also chafed at the unions’ lingering commitment to corporatist arrangements that were being abandoned by capitalists and state managers by the 1980s.

As Panitch argued in a series of penetrating [essays](#) on [corporatism](#), these arrangements were dangerous not simply because, as a system of state-induced class collaboration, they turned union leaders into agents of discipline and control over the rank and file. He feared that the very ineffectiveness of corporatism in restraining industrial militancy during the 1970s raised the possibility of coercive measures not just against specific trade union freedoms, but a broader turn toward authoritarian statism. Corporatism has since faded along with the erosion of the labor movement, but Panitch was prescient in anticipating an expansion of the most coercive and repressive aspects of the state as part of the neoliberal turn.

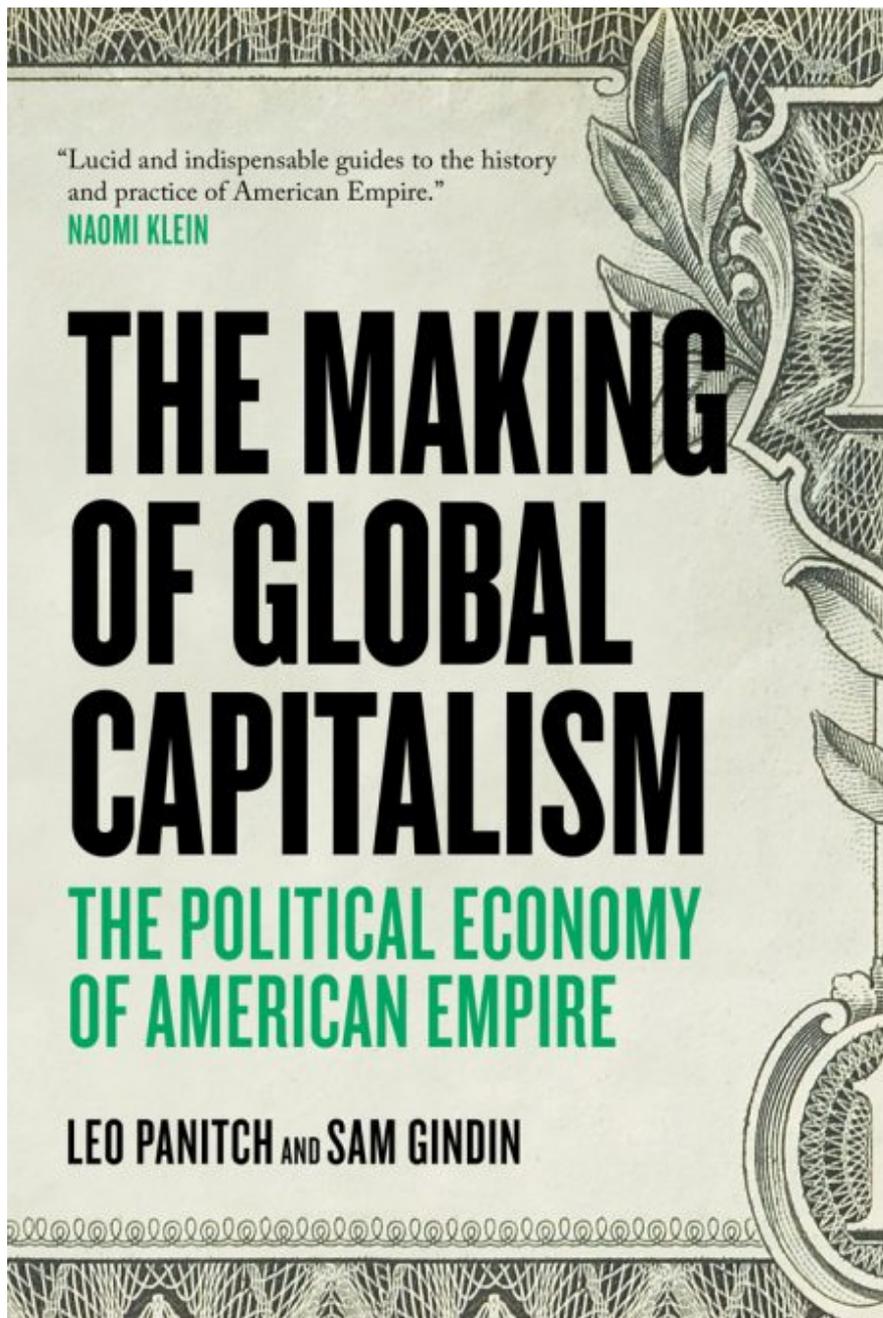
Why pay so much attention to the often arcane questions of party and union democracy? There is, after all, a real danger that committing to transform the structures and procedures of existing political organizations can suck socialists away from the work of class formation and into the rarefied world of bureaucratic combat. This contradiction befell the Labour New Left from the Bennite insurgency through Jeremy Corbyn’s tenure as Labour leader, and it will likely befall the new democratic-socialist movement in the United States. Despite these dangers, however, socialists have no choice but to prioritize questions of party and union democracy. This is not just because democracy is desirable in itself, but because organizations run on oligarchic lines will not generate the popular political and administrative capacities that will be needed to radically transform the state.

As Panitch and Gindin argue in their essay, “[Transcending Pessimism: Rekindling Socialist Imagination](#),” in the absence of popular capacities to

govern the economy, civil society, and the state — skills that can only be learned through the practice of building socialist organizations and cultures within capitalism — “people couldn’t run a society even if power was handed over by the ruling classes.” As such, they would be condemned to live under the indefinite tutelage of state functionaries ruling in their names, as in the “actually existing socialism” of the Soviet bloc or in China and Cuba today.

A Different Kind of State

We come, then, to the heart of Panitch’s Marxism: the question of the state and its role in both capitalist society and in the transition to democratic socialism. “Many analysts still labor under the illusion that the neoliberal project holds markets and states in opposition to each other, and seeks to promote the former at the expense of the latter. Panitch and Gindin never accepted this framework.” If there is one idea that he and his closest collaborators are identified with, it is their rejection of the “markets versus states” dichotomy so common in mainstream political commentary, and their related focus on the intimate relationships between global capitalism and the American state in particular. [*The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*](#), was the crowning achievement of Panitch and Gindin’s decades-long intellectual partnership, and it most clearly articulated their conception of the complex relationship between states and the global capitalist system. (*Jacobin* published a symposium on the book after it came out, which you can read [here](#).) Many analysts still labor under the illusion that the neoliberal project holds markets and states in opposition to each other, and seeks to promote the former at the expense of the latter. Panitch and Gindin never accepted this framework, and they devoted much of their talents to demonstrating the proposition that nation-states, far from being marginalized or superseded in the era of global capitalism, were instead its main architects.



Over the course of many years and many works, they made a convincing case that capitalist interests rely on a world of states to create the framework they operate within, and on the American state in particular, to superintend and coordinate its global management. To that end, the American state has restructured not just itself but other states through economic, political, or military means in order to make what is abstractly referred to as “globalization” possible. In their view, the spread of capitalism to every corner of the planet did not result from some inexorable unfolding of the system’s natural laws and tendencies, but a conscious political project “brought about by human agents and the institutions they created, albeit under conditions not of their choice.” In formulating this analysis, Panitch and Gindin developed and extended Ralph

Miliband's pioneering work in Marxist state theory, particularly his classic 1969 book [*The State in Capitalist Society*](#). In his [reflections on the book](#) fifty years after its publication, Panitch highlighted its basic purpose: to challenge both the pluralist theories of power that dominated the study of politics in the postwar period and the Keynesian idea that economic policy-making had become autonomous from capitalist interests. Despite the enormous changes in political economy since Marx's time, Miliband insisted that capitalism remained "an atomised system which continues to be marked, which is in fact more than ever marked, by that supreme contradiction of which Marx spoke a hundred years ago, namely the contradiction between its ever more social character and its enduring private purpose."



Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin.

While Panitch and Gindin were highly attuned to the enduring tendencies of the capitalist state, they were also aware of the many ways it has changed, largely as a result of popular struggles, since Marx's and Engels's time. In "[The State and the Future of Socialism](#)," Panitch observed that Marx, Engels, and Lenin tended to emphasize the state as an overtly repressive form of class organization, an instrument of physical domination by the bourgeoisie over the working class. It is not hard to see why, as most political regimes in their time were overtly authoritarian and not shy about drowning their opponents in blood. As working-class and democratic movements grew in size and strength, they shifted the mode of capitalist rule toward representative and parliamentary institutions. This shift certainly did not eliminate the state's repressive capacities — and, as Panitch pointed out, the rise of neoliberalism augured the potential growth of a new authoritarian statism. But it did tend to attenuate their

use against popular movements in advanced capitalist countries with liberal political regimes.

In this light, the main elements of the traditional Marxist theory of the socialist state — the smashing of the bourgeois state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the withering away of the state — had to be reexamined and, if necessary, discarded. Panitch dispatched the withering away of the state rather quickly and on the basis of Marx's and Engels's own ambivalence on the subject. As he pointed out, their sketchy writings on the state in postcapitalist society acknowledged a continuing role for public authority even under conditions of full communism. The basic duties and functions that have to be carried out in any society — adjudication of disputes, public health, etc. — would remain, and the authority and subordination required to implement them could conceivably be employed in a voluntary and non-repressive fashion.

If dealing with the withering away of the state was relatively easy, addressing questions relating to the transition from capitalism to socialism was more difficult.

Panitch identified two main aspects of the concept of “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The first was the idea that socialism entailed the rule of the workers as the hegemonic class, the same way capitalists rule as the hegemonic class under capitalism. In Panitch's view, this concept is one of the main distinctions between Marxist socialism and social democracy, which tends to conceive of socialism as a mode of class cooperation instead of class rule. In this sense, it retains an enduring value that socialists would do well to preserve.

The second, and more problematic, aspect of the concept as employed by Marx, Engels, and Lenin was the stress they placed on repression and coercion in the transitional socialist state.

Panitch did not labor under the illusion that transitioning to socialism will be a neat and tidy process, even in the most liberal and democratic political regimes. What he did recognize, rightfully, was the threat authoritarian and dictatorial modes of rule posed to the development of the popular capacities needed to see through the establishment of a genuinely democratic-socialist society.

“Dictatorship in the proletarian state,” he argued, “will have more serious effects in terms of the consequences of great ‘relative autonomy’ of the political apparatus from the working class.” In other words, it would empower party leaders at the expense of the popular masses, and threaten to extinguish whatever democratic rights and freedoms workers were able to win for themselves under capitalist rule.

He was fond of quoting Rosa Luxemburg's [prescient early criticisms](#) of the Bolsheviks' methods of rule, as well as the testimony of a Soviet trade unionist

during *perestroika*: “Insofar as workers were backward and underdeveloped, this is because there has in fact been no real political education since 1924. The workers were made fools of by the party.” Panitch concluded that the concept of proletarian dictatorship should be abandoned so long as democratic socialists “retain a definition of socialism in which the proletariat becomes the hegemonic class” in a postcapitalist society.

Finally, there is the question of “smashing” the bourgeois state in the transition to socialism. Here is where Panitch had the most to say, and where he made a lasting contribution to Marxist political theory and strategy. Like his conception of the role of parties in class formation, Panitch arrived at many of his conclusions on this subject through close and passionate engagement with left-wing and working-class movements around the world. Again, his relationships with and participation in the Labour New Left played a key role in shaping his thinking on this central strategic question.

In 1979, a working group of the Conference of Socialist Economists published a pamphlet called *In and Against the State*. As the authors put it in their preface to the second edition, the main message of the pamphlet spoke to “the frustrations, contradictions and opportunities experienced by the more ‘professional’ state workers-teachers, social workers, advice workers, nurses, DHSS workers” in Britain. All of the authors worked in the public sector in one capacity or another, and they highlighted the deeply contradictory nature of people’s relationship to the welfare state, as both service recipients and state employees. Their goal was to arrive at a clearer understanding of the state that comprehended both its role in casting “a protective and opaque seal of freedom and equality over the class domination of capitalism” and the ways in which it provided opportunities for collective organization and struggle. In doing so, they sought to address, in both theoretical and practical terms, what Tony Benn called the “usual problems of the reformer”: the contradictory need “to run the economic system to protect our people who are now locked into it while we change the system” — a problem that both Bolshevik-inspired revolutionary socialists and social-democratic Keynesians either sought to paper over or avoid completely.

Panitch worked closely with elements in the Labour New Left who sought to put these ideas into practice, particularly those in and around the Greater London Council (GLC) in the 1980s. Their experiments in using the state to facilitate popular power and democratic administration informed Panitch’s view that socialists in advanced capitalist societies should not seek to “smash” the existing state apparatus, but to transform it in radically democratic directions. In this, he was also influenced by the work of Nicos Poulantzas, the great Greek-

French theorist whose exchanges with Ralph Miliband are still the starting point for serious thinking about the state and socialist strategy today.

For Panitch, the question was not more state *versus* less state, as in the sterile academic debates over neoliberalism, or smashing the state *versus* simply taking hold of it. The question was how to create a different kind of state in the process of radical social transformation.

Though it was not necessarily their intention, the likes of Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, and their analogs elsewhere did quite a bit of work to prepare the ground for the “Third Way” neoliberalism of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair by conflating the decline of the labor movement with the decline of class politics in general. While their political prescriptions for dealing with the rise of Reagan and Thatcher were deeply misguided, they did put their finger on something important: the broad appeal of right-wing anti-statism, even among those who had the most to gain from a robust welfare state.

As Richard Cloward, Frances Fox Piven, and other left-wing critics argued, the welfare state often served as a mode of regulating the poor in addition to providing a modicum of social provision for those most in need. In his contribution to the collection [*A Different Kind of State?*](#) Panitch argued that by the 1990s, people in the advanced capitalist countries had become disillusioned with both “big government” as they knew it and the false promises of market freedom. If democratic socialism was synonymous with developing popular capacities for self-rule, then this called for a fundamental overhaul not just of the representative and parliamentary aspects of the state, but its bureaucratic and administrative apparatus as well.

Pressure for transforming the state would naturally come, to a significant extent, from a popular democracy movement located outside the structures of the state — including, crucially, the extra-parliamentary wing of a mass democratic-socialist political party. If Marx took us inside the “hidden abode of production” to unmask the secrets of profit-making, Panitch proposed to look inside the state for potential sources of democratic transformation — to the growing numbers of workers employed in the public and quasi-public sectors and their unions.

Like the authors of *In and Against the State*, Panitch contended that public employees “were well placed to be facilitators of the collective organization of the poor, so they would no longer face the state or the market as powerless and passive individuals but have some collective identity and power.”

Dissatisfaction with budgetary austerity, as well as with the punitive and coercive aspects of the state ordinary people regularly come into contact with, constitute the potential basis for solidarity between those working for the state and those who rely on them for services and support. Practically speaking, this

would entail overcoming the “division between the functions of representation and administration, and replacing, wherever possible, the ‘appointment’ principle with an elective one, or at least the appointment of those who already have a democratic mandate and means of popular sanction from the group.” Socialists should not, however, assume that there is a ready-made constituency for this agenda out there in the community. The current practice of political representation is premised on the nonparticipation of the people at large in government affairs, and public agencies tend to reduce those who come into contact with them as passive clients.

“Democratic leaders and administrators,” Panitch insisted, must be willing and able to “encourage and facilitate the organization of communities of identity and interest” using the legitimacy and resources of their offices.

Panitch was well aware that the election of a democratic-socialist government genuinely committed to transforming the state and social relations would not, regardless of its level of popularity, rule out the possibility of violent reaction. He also acknowledged how the turn to neoliberalism necessarily entailed a relative strengthening of the repressive and judicial apparatuses of the state, both to insulate governments from the unpopularity of their policies and to deal with the social fallout of market competition.

“The more markets are freed from regulation,” Panitch noted, “the more people who are marginalized or defeated in market competition come to need public services. Welfare offices and courts don’t empty: they fill up — and soon we find that it is people rather than markets that are subject to more intense regulation and policing and judgment.”

As such, he foregrounded the importance of democratizing the judicial system and reducing the scope and strength of the state’s means of coercion. He called for broadening the ranks of the judiciary beyond those with formal legal education and training, establishing “legal care” systems that provide universal legal services and representation, and training judicial officials to educate the people about the legal system and how to best organize themselves to win justice.

Panitch also demonstrated a prescient concern with confronting and dismantling the carceral state. This had to be done, in his view, even though narrow “law-and-order” sentiments are still prevalent in society, because “a dynamic democracy is not one that represents and freezes current opinion. It is one that encourages the development of human capacities — above all, our collective capacities for creating a social order governed by justice.”

In this light, democratic socialists have an obligation to support — and, when necessary, clarify — demands to defund and disempower the police, even if

they do not yet command majority support.

“It’s a Long Fight”

Over the last decade, opposition to global capitalism has moved, to a significant extent, from protest to politics aimed at government power. From Syriza’s 2015 electoral breakthrough in Greece, to the rise of Bernie Sanders and the growth of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and to Jeremy Corbyn’s four-year tenure as leader of the British Labour Party, these developments have vindicated, in both positive and negative ways, Panitch’s intellectual project. “Panitch recognized that building the political and organizational capacities needed to re-form the working class amid the failures of twenty-first-century capitalism would take many false starts and much time.”

Syriza’s hugely disappointing performance in office underscored the risks of winning government power without maintaining the party’s capacity to link up with popular forces outside the state both to meet social needs and restructure political and economic life. Panitch and Gindin were criticized for “justifying” Syriza’s shortcomings by pointing to the country’s lack of domestic resources, the power of Greece’s creditors, and the failure of left-wing forces in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere to build support for the Greek people in their own countries.

They were certainly [not uncritical](#) of Alexis Tsipras and the Syriza leadership, but unlike [Yanis Varoufakis](#), who charged Tsipras in particular with throwing away the potential of the 2015 bailout referendum, they did not cast their criticisms in terms of “surrender” or “betrayal.” Syriza’s subsequent record in office vindicated much of Varoufakis’s critique. Together with their right-wing coalition partners, Syriza carried through deep austerity measures and adopted a number of questionable foreign policy stances.

Even so, Panitch and Gindin were not wrong to remind their most stringent detractors on the Left that they had vague answers, at best, for the likely consequences of a sharp break with global capitalism that nobody had adequate time to prepare for.

Panitch took heart from the unexpected success of Bernie Sanders and the growth of DSA into a meaningful presence in American political life, and he became friends with some of DSA’s most committed activists. He and Gindin definitively demonstrated the centrality of the American state in the making and maintenance of global capitalism, so the emergence of democratic socialism in the heart of the empire was a source of hope in the wake of Syriza’s disappointments.

They noted the fact that the Sanders campaigns and DSA are “class-focused”

instead of “class-rooted.” But in the context of contemporary American politics, this may be as much a strength as well as a weakness, because it holds out the possibility of “becoming grounded in working-class struggles but committed to the radical transformation of the generally exhausted institutions of the labor movement,” from transforming existing unions into genuinely working-class organizations to building new forms of organization capable of reaching black, immigrant, and Latino workers in unorganized sectors of the economy. They understood that Sanders [had to run as a Democrat](#) to gain a hearing in mainstream political life, but did not lose sight of the limitations and contradictions this raised for the movement that grew in his wake.

Finally, the contingency that Panitch and Miliband before him thought would never come to pass — the ascension of a genuine democratic socialist to the leadership of the British Labour Party — actually happened in 2015. Jeremy Corbyn’s election to party leadership was almost accidental, but it reflected the mounting rejection of New Labour and its toxic legacy in the party’s base. While Corbyn, his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, and the movement around them had the support of key unions and the activists in Momentum, they continually ran up against the biggest barrier to socialist politics in the party: Labour’s parliamentarians, some of whom waged a bitter campaign against Corbyn’s left-wing leadership.



Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn signs his manifesto for the winner of a raffle after speaking at a party conference on alternative models of ownership on

February 10, 2018 in London. (Chris J. Ratcliffe / Getty Images)

Despite leading Labour to its best election result in decades in 2017, Corbyn faced unremitting hostility not just from the Tories, business, and the press, but the scores of Labour MPs who had no interest in socialism or transforming the British state. Corbyn, Momentum, and the Labour New Left succeeded in promoting popular left-wing policies, changing the composition of key intraparty bodies (at least temporarily), and creating new departments like the Community Organizing Unit. But they could not overcome the party's internal contradictions on immediate political questions like Brexit, long-standing conflicts between parliamentarians and local constituency parties, and the dire need to reorganize the British working class after decades of political disintegration.

Despite the limitations and failures of all these efforts, Panitch remained committed to the politics of democratic socialism to the end. He recognized that building the political and organizational capacities needed to re-form the working class amid the failures of twenty-first-century capitalism would take many false starts and much time, even if the pressures of climate change make us feel like we have no time to spare.

Leo's retrospective [assessment](#) of Corbyn's Labour leadership could easily serve as an epigraph for his own political and intellectual project: "How much would he really have been able to do without longer-term organizing happening outside the government? Without rebuilding class institutions? Without political education? We have to be sober about this, it's a long fight."

Panitch embodied not just the political radicalism of the immigrant, working-class milieu of his youth. He also embodied its humanism, its internationalism, and its utter lack of pretension. In many ways, he and his lifelong friend Sam Gindin dedicated themselves to rebuilding the social infrastructures that made their working-class Winnipeg — the crucible of the [great 1919 general strike](#) — possible.

Leo's unshakable commitment to democratic socialism, grounded in the need to develop the collective capacity of working people to govern themselves, was an inspiration to all of us at *Jacobin*. His contributions probably did more to shape *Jacobin*'s political perspectives than those of any other single person. We, as well as the countless others he mentored and supported, are left with the great responsibility of carrying that commitment forward.