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# Leo Panitch (1945-2020) - “An irreparable loss”

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**The global left has suffered an irreparable loss with the passing of Leo Panitch this weekend. He was incredibly warm, inviting, and generous to others. And he remained committed to the end to the cause of socialism and human emancipation.**



*Leo Panitch was a pillar of the international left, an indefatigable builder of institutions, and a dear friend.*

The global left has suffered an irreparable loss with the passing of Leo Panitch this weekend. Leo had recently been diagnosed with multiple myelomas and had contracted coronavirus, which developed into viral pneumonia while in the hospital receiving treatment.

Leo was born into a family of East European Jewish immigrants in Winnipeg, Canada, and completed his PhD at the London School of Economics under the supervision of Ralph Miliband. His dissertation on the economic strategy of the British Labour Party was published in 1976 as [\*Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy: The Labour Party, the Trade Unions and Incomes Policy, 1945-1947\*](#). The thesis began a long intellectual partnership with Miliband, and in 1985 Leo joined him as co-editor of the *Socialist Register*, which Miliband had launched with John Saville in 1964.

Under Leo's steady hand, the *Register* continued to grow through the decades to come, establishing itself as one of the most important journals of the global left. Others joined him as co-editors through these years, most notably Colin Leys and later, Greg Albo, but Leo remained the fulcrum on which the project rested. And while he steered the *Register* through the demoralization of the neoliberal era, he continued to publish a series of landmark works, the most important of which were [\*The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour\*](#), which he cowrote with Leys, and more recently [\*The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire\*](#), which brought to fruition a decade-long project with his dear friend and comrade Sam Gindin.

Through all these years, there were several themes that remained constant in his work. The first of these was undoubtedly Leo's deep study of the perils and promise of social democracy. Leo was fully appreciative of the historic gains that the labor movement had been able to acquire through the social-democratic project. But much as his mentor Miliband, he was also an insightful critic of that

project. The fundamental argument of *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy* was that, as the Labour Party took over the management of the British state, it not only had to tamp down on the unions and the Left, but ended up prioritizing the interests of employers over those of the party's own constituency.

Leo saw this as a structural constraint, not a moral failure. Labour simply never figured out how to marry the compulsions involved in steering a bourgeois economy with its stated goals of advancing working-class interests. And building on this argument, he went on to examine how social-democratic parties across Europe were succumbing to the same constraint through the 1970s and '80s. He published a series of groundbreaking papers on the shift from class struggle to class management, the early tranche collected in 1986's [Working-Class Politics in Crisis](#). These analyses hold great value today, when a revived left is once again looking to resurrect the welfare state.

By the late 1980s, Leo had established himself as one of the leading left-wing critics of European social democracy. Within his discipline of political science, this meant a certain amount of derision from his colleagues. In the scholarly work of that era, he is often cited by American political scientists, only to be quickly brushed aside as unduly pessimistic or simple-minded. Among heterodox and progressive political scientists in the 1990s, the fashion was to point to the continuing stability of the welfare state, its success in navigating the pressures of globalization, and the practical wisdom of the Third Way turn of Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder.

But, in fact, Leo was years ahead of the discipline. His deep analysis of the conservatizing trend within social-democratic parties, the increasing distance from the working class, the impending disaster from the managerial takeover — all this is now standard fare within mainstream circles, as they try to make sense of the crisis that engulfs the Atlantic world. This is no doubt why Verso published a second edition of his brilliant critique of the Blairite project within Labour, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism*, which came out at the peak of Third Way euphoria and today seems prophetic.

However, while Leo was an unsparing critic of “really existing” social democracy, his alternative was to deepen and build on its gains, not to propose a mythical “revolutionary” alternative. This was the second stream of his scholarship. Because he recognized that the era of revolutions had long passed, Leo was forced to keep his feet on the ground, to think about practical strategy, a real road to working-class revival — instead of only discussing in general terms the need for a revolutionary rupture from capitalism.

For him, the only way out of capitalism was by building on social democracy, not doing an end run around it. This compelled him to think about how the defeats of the 1970s might have been avoided, how a labor movement might be rebuilt, how the next generation of leaders might better navigate the constraints of capitalism. This was a dominant theme of his work throughout the Reagan-Thatcher era, and a good sample of it was published in 2001 in his [Renewing Socialism: Democracy, Strategy and Imagination](#). In these essays, even as Leo acknowledged the failures of the 1970s, he held firmly to the centrality of the working class if the socialist project was to have any future.

Far from being dogmatic, however, Leo was acutely sensitive to the fact that we were living in a very different era of capitalism from the one in which the Left had built up its own institutions. Central to that difference was the profoundly more globalized character of the system at the turn of this century. Analyzing its dynamics, understanding its development, and above all, locating the role of the state in its evolution, was the third theme that guided his work. It culminated in *The Making of Global Capitalism*, cowritten with Sam Gindin, in which Leo and Sam offered a sweeping account of not only the global economy, but the political foundations on which it rested.

The internationalization of capital had not been driven by autonomous economic forces or technological change, they argued, but had always been a political project pushed by the US state. And the globalization of capitalist accumulation was accompanied by the globalization of a particular state form — the two went hand in hand. Hence, the spread of capitalism went hand in hand with the power and influence of the state form that had been incubated by the US ruling class — and hence, a deepening of American hegemony. The implication was clear — that if the juggernaut of global capitalism were a political creation, then it might be vulnerable to changes in the political firmament.

Figuring out just how the fight against this capitalism would unfold no doubt would have been the challenge Leo took on if he had lived to continue his project. He was absolutely sure that if it had any chance of succeeding, it would be through a revived, creative, and democratic labor movement. Leo spent his whole life trying to build institutions that would contribute to that movement. From the politics department at York University, which he joined in 1984 and helped build into a powerhouse of political economy, to the *Register*, to several political initiatives in his beloved Toronto, to the annual Historical Materialism conference — Leo was an indefatigable builder of institutions.

He was enabled by an amazing generosity of spirit. Leo was one of the most instinctively democratic people I have ever met. In 2010, I helped organize a conference in Delhi on imperialism, in which Leo was one of the invited speakers. This was, I think, his first visit to India. Over the several days of the conference, Leo was constantly surrounded by local organizers, more so than any of the other participants. I would often find him sitting on the lawn outside the venue, his long legs folded uncomfortably under him, so engrossed in a conversation with a labor activist or a party organizer that I'd have to drag him away. And each time, he would take the number of the person he was talking to, promise to send them materials and contacts — and then he would follow through. He would always refer to them in our conversations as “the comrade from . . .,” never as “that guy,” or some other such assignation.

When he and Colin invited me to join them as co-editors of the *Register*, I was honored, but also somewhat trepidatious. I was coming on along with Greg Albo. Greg was a student of Leo's and had known him and Colin for years. I was the newcomer, parachuting into a project that had been anchored in Toronto for two decades and had built its own internal culture, deep and abiding friendships, and shared political histories. Naturally, I had some misgivings about how I would fit into this operation. Leo not only integrated me into the journal's culture, but insisted that it bear my own stamp. He invited me to construct a New York editorial committee, to balance out the committee in Toronto; he and Colin scrupulously ensured that any significant discussion between the three editors in Toronto — Greg being the third — were carried out only in my presence; and he invited me to bring my own views and expertise into the journal with as much enthusiasm as anyone can ever expect.

He did all this effortlessly. It didn't come from a labored fidelity to moral principles, or a grudging adjustment to circumstances. It was natural to him. Once, when I was in Toronto for a conference Leo organized at York, he came to my hotel early in the morning to drive us to the university, which is located outside the city. I was a bit late coming down to the car, and Leo was visibly perturbed. I flippantly observed that it was only a few minutes, and anyway, so what if we are a little late? Leo replied, in some pain, that the opening presentation was by someone who had traveled several hundred miles, and he did not want to be disrespectful to them by walking in late.

I do not remember who the person was. I know they were not one of the stars on the left conference circuit. And there were going to be at least a hundred people in the audience, so they probably

would not even have noticed his late arrival. But Leo was not concerned with that. He was simply motivated by his obligation to them — as a comrade, a human being.

That was Leo. I have met few people in my life so warm, so inviting to others, soaking up every ounce of energy and knowledge that their experiences grant them. He was a pillar of the international left. But he was also a dear friend. And the world feels quite a bit colder without him.

**Vivek Chibber**

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**P.S.**

- Jacobin. 12.22.2020:  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/12/leo-panitch-obituary>
- Vivek Chibber is a professor of sociology at New York University. He is the editor of Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy.