

# **Introduction: the British labour movement between unity and division**

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The current troubles inside the Labour Party – which followed Jeremy Corbyn’s election as party leader in September 2015 and were accelerated by the 23 June 2016 Brexit referendum – have made a number of concerns that seemed outmoded topical again, and rekindled the interest of both academics and practitioners in organisational matters. A party built just over a century ago by the joint efforts of most trade-union and socialist organisations, a party that had grown to become the second ‘government party’ in the British political system and seemed there to stay has often appeared, since Corbyn became leader, on the verge of implosion – a situation that has left scholars and the general public struggling to find satisfactory explanations, and to foresee the possible outcomes. The Labour Party’s surprisingly satisfying results in the 8 June 2017 snap election, although they have led a number of Corbyn critics to qualify their scepticism, will probably not put an end to the crisis. An essential purpose of this book is therefore to put this disconcerting moment into historical perspective, to show that the present disunities are nothing new and are far from capturing every source of disagreement within the British labour movement.

The British labour movement, from its inception, was never a homogeneous entity, not even in those rare phases when unity seemed to prevail over fracture and factionalism. Some moments appeared, at the time, as triumphs of class solidarity: 1906 and the formation of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP); 1926 and the Trades Union Congress’s (TUC)’s call for a general strike; 1945 and the landslide victory of the Labour Party in the general election. Yet the seeds of internal strife were always there. The 1906 breakthrough was followed, only five years later, by a wave of strikes in which disappointment

towards the newly formed Labour Party played no minor part (Béliard, 2014). The year 1926 is not simply recalled as the only general strike in British history, but also as one which was interrupted after nine days because of the TUC's decision to back down and let the miners continue their struggle alone. As for the Attlee years, they saw the Labour Party embrace the cause of the British Empire and of anti-communism in ways that were bound to create a gulf between the party and colonial workers on the one hand, and left-wing trade unionists on the other. These three examples, which all belong to the first half of the twentieth century, point in the same direction, and can help us think about the origins of the movement's segmentation, as well as about current quarrels. What they remind us of is that the roots of the British labour movement are so diverse that bringing its heterogeneous components under a single roof was – and still is – a highly challenging task.

At the same time there has been recognition that dissensus is constitutive of any organisation – as illustrated by the case of the Labour Party. The tension between its two – right and left – wings has been seen as its main weakness, but it has also functioned as a system of checks and balances which has traditionally helped maintain the party in the mainstream (Fielding, 2002), while providing a secure platform for the expression of political debate (Minkin, 2014). The New Labour ascendancy and controversial legacy, based on the ability of the modernisers, through ideological as well as organisational reforms – both to align the party members with the leadership (Avril, 2013) and to make a mainly docile PLP stay 'on message' – would seem to illustrate the dangers of the faith placed in the appearance of consensus and in the necessity of presenting a united front to the outside world. In fact, dissensions can also be seen as barometers, revealing inner tendencies and external pressures. The efforts deployed by the Blair leadership to institute consensus eventually led to systemic failure (Avril, 2016a, 2016b; Shaw, 2016) and to the severe disconnection of the party from what had once been its 'heartlands', leading to denunciations of 'tepid consensus', or 'consensus of the graveyard' (Seyd and Whiteley, 2002: 207, 174). If unity imposed from above can lead to disarray and decline, then the lesson may be that internal conflict should be rehabilitated, as a means for organisations to move forward.

Paradoxically, the debate over unity and division is so omnipresent in the literature devoted to the British labour movement that few books have attempted to study it *per se*, as if, being virtually everywhere, the question could not be examined easily. The consensus–dissension dialectic is nonetheless a familiar topic for all those involved or interested in the British labour movement, be they activists, historians, political scientists or industrial relations scholars. Indeed, labour history as a sub-discipline developed at first as a history of working-class associations, in particular trade unions, so that its practitioners had no choice but to examine their incessant centripetal and centrifugal movements, the successive or simultaneous processes of growth,

split and amalgamation (among countless narratives, see Cole, 1949; Davis, 2009; Fraser, 1999; Morton and Tate, 1956; Pelling, 1992). More generally, labour history has always explored the nature and evolution over time of the roots of working-class unity, difference and division (Campbell and McIlroy, 2010). Much the same can be said of those academics or journalists – often but not always the same people – who have chosen the Labour Party as their field of expertise (Cole, 1949; Pelling and Reid, 2005; Thorpe, 2008). It cannot be understood without serious consideration of its inner tensions, of ‘the balance between democracy, diversity and tolerance on the one hand and unity, firm leadership and a capacity for coordinated collective effort on the other’ (Shaw, in this volume). As for specialists of employment relations, they have to deal with similar phenomena of fragmentation, in particular when studying the uneasy relationship between trade-union officialdom and the rank-and-file (Hyman, 1989; Zeitlin, 1989).

Though disunity is a familiar theme for all those interested in labour matters, some divisions were long overlooked, in particular the divisions of the British working class along gender and race lines. The essential place occupied in the economy first by female workers and later by workers from the Commonwealth did not lead easily to their integration within the ranks of the existing labour movement, so that studies of working-class organisations have repeatedly ignored those workers and the diverse forms of exploitation and oppression they had to face from employers and the State. That neglect of sexual and ethnic minorities by labour historians – and the obliteration of the discrimination at times imposed by the trade unions themselves – was no coincidence. It reflected, to a certain extent, the very composition of the British working class in its formative years: women workers until the First World War were indeed assigned to very specific areas of industrial production (Clark, 1995), and colonial workers, though present in the British Isles long before the arrival of the Windrush, suffered from similar confinement and were even less ‘visible’ (Belchem, 2014; Tabili, 1994).

But such academic neglect can also be seen as reproducing and even consolidating the kinds of domination and exclusion experienced in everyday life. As the British proletariat became more feminine and multicultural, so did – arguably too slowly – the scope of labour history and studies. It took the efforts of female historians who were both feminists and socialists to start giving women workers their rightful place in British social and political history (Rowbotham, 1973), as it took the efforts of non-white historians with radical leanings to do the same for colonial workers (Ramdin, 1987). Since then, attempts to produce histories of the labour movement attentive to both gendered and racial tensions have been few and far between (Davis, 2009). And this volume itself, though almost half its chapters are by female authors, does not escape that distortion – for the understandable but nonetheless regrettable reasons stated above. With only one chapter focusing on the gender issue, and

none on race as such, the editors agree that some essential forms of disunity within the British labour movement are only touched upon and that further research into those alleys is needed. New inquiries into the 1976–1977 Grunwick dispute and the 2005 Gate Gourmet strike, for example, could illuminate many of the other fragmentations analysed in this volume.

### **Disunity: a constant feature with ancient roots**

In the days of the Industrial Revolution, when a unified working class was still in the making, the first form of self-defence against capitalist exploitation – the Luddite rebellions set aside – was the building of craft unions, especially after 1824, when the Anti-Combination Act was removed. But at the same time the fight for workers' rights took two additional directions: a struggle for the suffrage (at first in collaboration with middle-class radicals) on the one hand, a struggle for economic independence (via the founding of Owenite communities or co-operatives) on the other. Though motivated by a common rejection of the established order, those three strands had little in common and were, in many ways, intellectually incompatible. The fact that the same individuals could jump from one cause to the other does not invalidate that observation. For about a decade the Chartist movement was able to merge all those separate initiatives into a single powerful movement. Yet even Chartism suffered from inner conflicts regarding both means ('moral' versus 'physical' force) and aims (universal suffrage, land reform or Red Republicanism).

In the period that followed, divisive factors were once again more visible than unifying ones – all the more so as the most serious source of division inside the working class, the exclusion of women from the embryonic labour movement, had only been very partially and temporarily overcome by the Chartists. The failure of the mass movement in favour of the People's Charter led to its dissolution, and to a rebirth and mutation of the distinctive currents it had momentarily tied together. Between 1848 (when the third and last petition for the Charter was rejected) and 1914, the labour movement did take giant steps towards unity – a forward march symbolised by the progress from Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded in 1893, to Labour Representation Committee (LRC), founded in 1900, and then Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), founded in 1906. But even though the Edwardian proletariat was numerically much stronger and sociologically more cemented than the early Victorian one, the labour movement in its most impressive phase of growth remained divided both industrially and politically. Industrially, the formation of local Trades Councils in the 1860s and the foundation of the TUC as a national forum in 1868 could be interpreted as a crucial overcoming of sectional barriers. But those steps forward towards united class action left on the side of the road the majority of the working class, that is, most women workers and the bulk of 'unskilled' workers. It took the 1889 upsurge, and another

one between 1910 and 1914, for the dockers, the seamen and other 'general labourers' to be seen by the leaders of the New Model Unions as allies and not pariahs. Politically, the creation of the Labour Party did not lead to ideological unification. Although it was supported by the socialist ILP, the party refused to adopt a socialist programme, and the oldest of the socialist parties in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), founded in 1884, declined to take part in the adventure. There was, in fact, little agreement over the kind of new order that should be built, and over how it should be achieved, the path imagined depending on whether one was inspired primarily by Marx, Jesus Christ or Gladstone. 'Labourism' as a doctrine was always elusive, as so many authors have underlined (Poirier, 1996; Saville, 1973; Shaw, 2004). Naturally, the possible articulation between the industrial and the political branches of the labour movement was another potential source of divergence. The Fabian Society intellectuals were happy to provide the Labour Party with expert studies and schemes, but wary of initiatives from the grassroots that might shake their 'high politics'.

With the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, the old oppositions gave way to new ones, which were not unrelated. Should the labour movement speak for 'the exploited' only or for 'the people' in general? Should it attempt to unite all labourers against the capitalist class, including on the international front, or should it aim at uniting all ranks of society, in view of defending national interests first? Those ancient dilemmas took on new shapes, which the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920 crystallised (Ward, 1998). The formation of the first Labour governments, in 1924 and in 1929, might have appeared as the symbol of a triumph of reform over revolution, of British moderation over continental follies. But the disillusionments produced by each of those experiences, far from making the British labour movement the unified whole of which so many dreamt, engendered renewed tensions (Howell, 2002; Riddell, 1999). In the troubled inter-war years, the professional politicians of the Labour Party and the TUC headquarters remained challenged by the communists, and more generally by the section of the working class that took militant steps without waiting for orders from above. The fact that the ILP, once the core of the Labour Party, chose to leave the party in 1932 says a lot about the turmoil that the labour movement was then going through (Cohen, 2007).

While the Second World War and the Attlee era appear as a time when divergences within the labour movement were relatively muted, every decade since then has produced its own version of disunity (Cronin, 2004). A bird's eye view reveals a recurring pattern: a tendency to unite around common goals when the Labour Party is in opposition; a tendency to diverge when it is in office. Some of the most spectacular phases of labour unrest after 1945 took place under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, as a large number of their (waged and unionised) voters felt that Labour was not fulfilling its

promises. Since then, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's management of the Labour Party (their choice to govern in Margaret Thatcher's footsteps in terms of economic policy, to loosen the historical link binding the party to the unions, and to address the City and 'Middle England' rather than the party's traditional working-class supporters) has almost led to a divorce between the party and the class it was originally set up to represent – with a series of consequences affecting the organisations still identifying themselves as part of 'the labour movement' (McIlroy and Daniels, 2009).

Apparently contradicting the 'law of history' presented above, the Corbyn episode is there to remind us that, even in opposition, the Labour Party can be divided – essentially over what is the best road for regeneration and what the 'new kind of politics', a phrase used by both Blair and Corbyn, is supposed to look like (Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2015). Can the party be led by a man with minority support among Labour MPs, who may enjoy majority support among the new activists gathered inside Momentum, but whose pro-immigration stance risks alienating some traditional Labour voters even more, thus making the Labour Party unelectable? Or should the party instead trust leaders who supported the war against Iraq? That alternative seems risky now that the Chilcot Inquiry has confirmed that Tony Blair's decision was motivated more by his special relationship with George W. Bush than by the feelings of British people. One of the questions that needs to be asked is whether the Corbyn moment is just a repetition of past battles, or whether it is a desperate and possibly final attempt to bridge the gap between the party and the ideal of socialism on the one hand, and between the party and the working class on the other. What is certain is that the long-forgotten queries (who is 'us' and who is 'them'? who is entitled to wear the 'labour' label?) are re-emerging, thereby justifying a re-examination of the past in the light of current preoccupations, and of course a scrutiny of the present antagonisms themselves.

### **Against fragmentation, imagined unities**

As described above, the British labour movement was formed of different groups trying to achieve different things. This does not imply that those different components did not seek to achieve some form of unity. For practical reasons, it was often felt that divergences over long-term objectives should not be an obstacle to united action around short-term goals. Besides, each group having a certain vision of how to improve the lot of the workers, the question raised was not only that of temporary alliances, but also at times that of winning over the other branches to one's conceptions – which was done more or less explicitly.

Chartism constituted a practical answer to the problem of united working-class action at a time when the question had hardly been asked in theoretical

terms. In a period when waged industrial workers were only just beginning to think of themselves as a class with specific interests, it was through the movement that the working class 'made itself', that the 'labouring classes' lost their plural. Chartism brought together labour activists who until then had followed different itineraries, for example anti-Poor Law campaigners and Ten Hour Day fighters, the suffrage appearing for a miraculous moment as the single political tool through which social problems could be solved. But the unity thus achieved was fragile, and some historians have contested its very existence, arguing that Chartist demands were formulated in the class-blind language of populism (Stedman Jones, 1983).

The need for a common roof was nonetheless too vital to be eclipsed for long. It was the bitter strikes led by the New Model Unions of the 1850s and 1860s that produced the flourishing of Trades Councils, as it was felt that a local carpenters' strike should be able to rely on support from other skilled workers (see Béliard in this volume). The same necessity to present employers with a united front led to contacts and connections across the seas, and to the foundation in London, in 1864, of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA). It illustrated the fact that the question of class unity suffered no borders, though the British labour movement would soon become plagued with insularity. For a couple of years, the same men who led the London Trades Council sat on the board of the IWMA, embodying the possibility of solid alliances in spite of ideological divergences between the disciples of Proudhon and those of Mazzini, between Methodists and atheists, and so on.

The experience of the Paris Commune in 1871 drove most labour leaders in Britain away from the revolutionary kind of socialism around which the international labour movement would reunite itself in 1889. Confined within national borders, a narrower form of unity developed in the shape of the TUC. A united entity it was, but only to a limited extent. It had no real authority over the huge federations under its umbrella, federations that were themselves becoming so rigid as to lose touch with their grassroots. Moreover, the TUC acted as a lobby more than as an army, and its ties with the middle classes seemed stronger than with the 'wretched of the earth' – as exemplified by the enduring loyalty of the miners' leaders to the Liberal Party. As a result, its capacity to represent the working class as a whole, and to lead it to victory, was contested, in particular during the 'employer backlash' of the 1890s, when its impotence was made blatant. Reinvesting the political front, the hope of the activists who founded the ILP in 1893 was to rally the bulk of their fellow workers and undo the chains still attaching them to their betters via the Liberal and Conservative electoral machines – with little success at first. In the late 1890s, Robert Blatchford's socialist newspaper *The Clarion* promoted an alternative to both the ILP and the TUC, in the shape of a National and International General Federation of Trade and Labour Unions (NIGFTLU). That

unprecedentedly ambitious project, which aimed to unite the English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish workers both industrially and politically, was countered by the TUC's plan for a General Federation of Trade Unions, which achieved little outside the elimination of the NIGFTLU (Barrow and Bullock, 1996).

The Taff Vale decision, in 1901, drove most TUC leaders to back the idea of independent labour representation in Parliament, so that when the PLP was proclaimed in 1906, it seemed the British labour movement had reached the greatest ever degree of unity, relegating nefarious divisions to the past. But the PLP, in many ways, reproduced the TUC's shortcomings: cosy relationships with the Liberals and a 'staircase and corridors' policy which proved hardly adequate to protect the workers from material hardship and exploitation in the workplace. Clearly the PLP's *raison d'être* was not to offer guidance for collective action. The workers active inside the SDF had their own vision of proletarian unity, inspired by the success of their SPD comrades in Germany: a labour movement based on the socialist doctrine and where the political element would be the guide, not the trade unions. But because the SDF remained a rather marginal chapel, their imagined unity failed to materialise (Crick, 1994).

Other workers on the left of the PLP, however, had plans for a regenerated labour movement, united on more combative foundations. In Britain, that syndicalist current was characterised by its intention to transform the trade-union machinery from the inside, rather than start revolutionary unions from scratch. Their tactic, theorised as 'boring from within', stemmed from the idea that the huge and powerful organisations built by the workers were worth keeping, but that they could only be made to serve the rank-and-file by overthrowing the corrupt 'fakirs' at their head. They would then become tools for the class struggle, make parliamentary politics redundant and become the cells of the Co-operative Commonwealth (Béliard, 2010). Though the 'One Big Union' (OBU) that they had in mind corresponded to a widespread aspiration to unity, it did not replace the existing union structures, except in Ireland (O'Connor, 1988). The Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen and transport workers that the established union leaders offered as a substitute for the OBU in 1914 was interrupted by the outbreak of war before it had time to prove its (in)efficiency.

The First World War saw the main labour leaders place national unity above international class unity (Winter, 1974). This led, in 1920, to the formation of the CPGB, a party that, although far from organising as many workers as the Labour Party, was hoping it could convince a majority of them to gather under its flag. Because of the Labour Party's influence over the masses, an influence largely mediated through the trade-union apparatus, Lenin advised the British Bolsheviks to pursue their cause inside the unions, and even, if possible, inside the Labour Party, rather than from the outside. This was 'boring from within' all over again, in other words entryism as a way for a



minority group to conquer a majority. The Labour Party never accepted the CPGB's applications, but the unions were less timid, and for decades the communists were active inside the movement (Hinton and Hyman, 1975; Samuel, 2006).

Because from the 1920s onwards the hold of the Labour Party over working-class opinion was confirmed, and because the trade unions, however bureaucratic, proved capable of organising millions and, at times or in certain sectors, a majority of workers, the revolutionary groups that hoped the working class could one day play a revolutionary role often resorted to the same tactics, the most famous case in post-war Britain being the Trotskyist group Militant Tendency, which was eventually expelled from the Labour Party in the mid-1980s (Crick, 1986). Neil Kinnock's strike against Militant infuriated the hard left but brought the party's right and soft left closer together. Thus, in discarding those rebel groups, the Labour Party could claim that it was preserving the party's unity and purging it from the poison of division. However, this demonstration of 'social-democratic centralism' also manifested that, as a democratic and pluralist answer to the issue of unity, it could also be found wanting (Shaw, 2002).

Since 1945, competing conceptions of what foundations labour unity should be built on and what objectives the working class should give itself have therefore mostly been expressed within the framework of the Labour Party and/or the trade unions. The party's predominantly pragmatic approach, coupled with its ideological flexibility, has allowed it to harbour many minority strands over time and to avoid fatal breakaways (Foote, 1985). Until Labour became New Labour, the doctrinal vagueness of 'Labourism' did not preclude internal political unity, nor did it mean that it was not ideologically separated from neighbouring parties. However, the capacity of the Labour Party and of its trade-union partners to constitute suitable forums and provide the appropriate answers has been repeatedly questioned, in particular from workers on the left, who have often hesitated between abandoning a disappointing Labour Party (with the risk of leaving a mass organisation for a sect and of fracturing the labour movement) and staying on board (with the danger of betraying one's ideals and of safeguarding a purposeless unity).

From that point of view, the Corbyn phenomenon is of great interest, in that it is fostered by grassroots activists who all claim to share a concern for the future of working people, but who are divided as to the way to go forward (on the heterogeneity of Momentum members, see Avril in this volume), especially in the context of the post-Brexit vote chaos. Are the current throes marking the end of the 'labourist' alliance? Is the Labour Party still the most adequate vehicle of working-class interests – if ever it was – or should Corbyn take the risk of looking beyond his party to help bring about a superior form of unity? Is the ongoing realignment to the left, which is testing the party's ideological flexibility to breaking point, doing nothing more than dividing

the party in the face of its political enemies? Or will the party, buoyed by the unexpectedly good results of June 2017, regroup around the Corbyn agenda? Is the current Labour leadership, after almost three decades of neoliberal consensus, managing to shift the centre ground of British politics to the left? These are some of the questions that have yet to be resolved.

### **The convergence–divergence dialectic: historiographical landmarks**

Ubiquitous yet understudied, the unity–disunity theme has had its own ups and downs – with the *Zeitgeist* and the authors’ political preferences as the main parameters (Callaghan, Fielding and Ludlam, 2003: 1–2). In the choice to praise or denigrate dissensus, in the choice to celebrate or minimise consensus, the spirit of the times has played a role that cannot be neglected. The growth of class consciousness and the search for unity were privileged objects of research in the phase when the labour movement seemed engaged in a never-ending ‘march forward’, whereas passivity and fragmentation have come to the fore mostly since the downward spiral of the 1980s. Similarly, politically and socially apathetic decades such as the 1950s or the 1990s have generally produced studies highlighting consensus (Clegg, 1964; Pelling, 1992), while troubled and restless ones, such as the 1970s, have as a rule shifted the focus towards rebels and dissenters (Holton, 1976; Lane, 1974).

Because specialists of the British labour movement have always been more or less directly involved in the political struggles of their time, they have tended to embrace visions of the problem that fitted with their engagements. As Eric Hobsbawm observed, “‘History,’ said one of the men who founded the modern teaching of the subject at our universities, “is past politics.” He might have gone further and said that much academic history is present politics dressed up in period costume’ (Hobsbawm, 1955: 14). The observation could apply just as well to both political science and the study of industrial relations. Robert George Gammage, the first historian of Chartism, being a moderate Chartist, was fiercely critical of leader Feargus O’Connor, and blamed his authoritarianism and extremism for the movement’s fallout with the middle classes and its eventual disintegration (Gammage, 1894, 1983). The history of the Transport and General Workers’ Union produced in the 1990s by Ken Coates and Tony Topham, two historians firmly on the left of Labour, who both campaigned for ‘workers’ control’ in the 1970s, is as sympathetic towards the syndicalist ‘troublemakers’ of the 1910s as it is critical of the TUC’s ‘realism’ and ‘pragmatism’ (Coates and Topham, 1991). Unsurprisingly perhaps, the celebration of unity is more common among moderates such as Henry Pelling and Hugh Clegg, as they tend to see splits and brutal mutations as potentially dangerous steps into the unknown (Clegg, 1964; Pelling, 1992), while breaking the consensus is usually appreciated by those with admittedly more radical sympathies (Hinton, 1983).

As for the authors of this book, refusing the comforting myth of an inexorable 'forward march' (Jacques and Mulhern, 1981), be it in the liberal-radical, social-democratic or Stalinist mould, refusing the parallel teleology of fragmentation and disappearance so prevalent in the 1980s and early 1990s, they have attempted to build upon previous explorations of the contradictory tendencies inside the British labour movement. The book revisits moments of crisis that were also moments of truth, up until the immediate past, re-examining labour bodies at times when they stood at the crossroads, when certainties were shaken and activists found themselves sitting awkwardly 'in between'. In doing so it seeks to identify more clearly and under new perspectives long-term convergences and divergences in terms of both organisational structures and decision-making processes.

### **Structure of the book**

To make sense of present-day disagreements, it is vital to look at the disparate nature of the British labour movement in a long-term perspective. The problems faced by the British labour movement since Corbyn's election at the head of Labour are strikingly different from those with which it was confronted in the days of the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union (GNCTU). British capitalism has changed immensely, so that its place in the world-system and the physiognomy of British society in the twenty-first century are not what they were at the dawn of the Victorian age. Working-class organisations, as a consequence, have also changed, sometimes to the point of being unrecognisable. The book therefore follows a diachronic approach, from the 1830s to the present day, progressively zooming in on the dilemmas experienced by the contemporary Labour Party.

The first section ('Labour's first century: disputed solidarities'), which comprises five chapters, covers the long nineteenth century, an era spanning from the Industrial Revolution to the First World War and which one might call the infancy and teenage years of the modern working class, when labour organisations were still struggling to be recognised by employers and the State (for historiographical overviews, see Allen and Chase, 2010; MacRaild and Martin, 2000). The period was also characterised by the fact that most workers were still excluded from the realm of parliamentary politics: in those days before the Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as the other big party of government, the idea that a Labour Party might one day be in office seemed hard to imagine (McKibbin, 1974, 1990; Tanner, 1990).

In chapter 1, Ophélie Siméon takes the case of Robert Owen's GNCTU, the first working-class association ever in Britain to try to unite all trades in the country to secure workers' control of their labour, and the biggest one so far. She argues that dissension was not a sign of failure and that this locus of creative tension was 'a cradle of debate and political experimentation for the radical nebula'. In chapter 2, Steven Parfitt takes us into the post-Chartist era

by attaching himself to the British branch of the American Knights of Labor, a much smaller but more long-lasting organisation, undone by rivalry with old and new unions as well as by its inability to relate to the 1889 upheaval. Here again he argues that this may not be deemed so much a failure as a missing link between the old and the new unions. In chapters 3 and 4 Lewis H. Mates and Yann Béliard offer case studies that mirror each other in more ways than one. Exploring the internal tensions that erupted during the Edwardian years and above all in the years of the Great Labour Unrest, they demonstrate that, be it in the mining town of Durham or in the port city of Hull, the same liberal, socialist and syndicalist currents competed for influence over the local working class. The ideological factions were also statutory and generational ones, and the divergences were made all the plainer when the 1910–1914 wave of spontaneous industrial action unfurled, confronting each group with very concrete choices that strikingly revealed what kind of unity (social or national) they most valued. Finally, in chapter 5, Anna Clark analyses the attempts made by domestic servants to form trade unions of their own, thus shedding light on the most segregated, atomised and yet numerous section of the British working class. Her study presents the ways a number of female servants, overcoming upper- and middle-class maternalism, tried to convince the mainstream of the (male) trade-union movement no longer to despise and exclude them. The portrait that emerges is one of a group that was less deferent and different than usually imagined, and acutely class conscious.

The second section ('Convergences, divergences and realignments on the left'), which comprises the next five chapters, looks at unity and disunity in the wider left, from the decades that saw the transformation of the Labour Party into a party of government – a phenomenon greeted by some as a positive coming of age but castigated by others as the epitome of integration into the status quo – through to the New Labour era and the present day. The chapters show that although the years between 1945 and 1979 are mostly perceived as the 'high tide of labour', that is, the moment when British workers were able to exert the greatest control over their own lives and enjoy the greatest weight over public policies, consensus was all the same a rare thing (Campbell, Fishman and McIlroy, 2007; McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell, 2007). In particular, on the occasions when Labour was in office (as confirmed by studies of the Blair years) tensions developed between the Labour Party leadership and its grassroots or allies, as great expectations were frustrated by the exercise of power.

In chapter 6, David Stewart focuses on the Co-operative movement, one of the oldest components of the labour movement, which formed a national network a long time before a Labour Party was created. Taking as his object the Resale Price Maintenance, a minimum retail price that manufacturers were able to enforce between 1917 and 1964, he explores the contrasting ways in which co-operators and Labour politicians related to it. Unearthing

the internal divisions on each side of the debate, he underlines how the official alliance between the Co-operative Union and the Labour Party implied neither a shared definition of socialism, nor a common vision of how social progress was to be achieved. In chapter 7, Anastasia Chartomatsidi questions inter-organisational divisions from the angle of foreign affairs, for divisions were not solely about domestic policies but also about international questions. The divergences, in the 1944–1947 period, between the Labour Party (then in office) and the much smaller CPGB (still supportive of the ‘democratic empires’ against the ‘fascist regimes’) on the one hand, and the even smaller Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party on the other, as regards world politics, are no revelation. But the comparison of their visions of the British military intervention in Greece in 1944–1945 offers a very telling prism to rediscover that chasm. Jeremy Tranmer’s chapter 8 then examines the splintering of British Communism in the 1980s. Using the concept of ‘revolutionary pragmatism’ which Nina Fishman (1995) saw as the cement of the CPGB in the 1930s and 1940s (i.e. a specific combination of trade-union loyalism, rank-and-fileism, ‘united front’ policy, and the belief that a revolutionary situation would somehow appear in the future), he contends that the crumbling of that shared creed accelerated the party’s disintegration, in the unfavourable context of the decline of the labour movement, the fall of the USSR and the advent of Thatcherism. When consensus over what factors made the leaders legitimate disappeared, the structure could no longer hold. In chapter 9, David Evans examines the theme of breakaway trade unions, with a focus on the era of neoliberalism. Beginning with the observation that breakaway trade unions are not an anomaly but have been a feature of labour (dis)organisation since the dawn of the labour movement, he underlines their complex and heterogeneous nature, rooting their birth firmly in structural location and historical context. Finally, Anne Beauvallet’s chapter 10 studies the English teachers’ unions, their relations with each other and with the Labour Party over time, with particular emphasis on the 2010–2015 period. Her inquiry shows that, in spite of an enviable rate of membership (close to one hundred per cent of the profession), they have lost the influence over public policies that they had acquired in the immediate post-war years, and were not treated with particular indulgence by the New Labour governments. Blair and Brown’s adaptation to the neoliberal order inherited from Thatcher is analysed as the main cause behind the growing mistrust of the teachers’ unions towards Labour, especially at a moment when teachers were returning to more radical tools of intervention.

The third section (‘The Labour Party today: fragmentation or mutation?’) comprises the four remaining chapters and zooms in on the Labour Party, with particular focus on the post-New Labour years. The overall trajectory of the party is one characterised by the loosening of ties between the Labour Party and its trade-union sponsors, the weakening of the bonds between

Labour and the class it long claimed to represent, and the possible disintegration of the party itself under Corbyn's leadership – which may or may not have been reversed by the unexpected turnaround in the June 2017 snap election. For the architects of the Third Way and those who sympathised with that so-called 'modernisation' of labourism, the Corbyn experiment can only end in electoral failure, although Labour's recent move to the left has also generated a certain degree of enthusiasm about the potential of a Corbyn-led party to redraw the British political landscape. The chapters in this section all point to such levels of uncertainty that there is every reason to be extremely cautious about future developments.

In chapter 11, Nick Randall provides a sweeping account of the PLP's post-war divisions and its contested position among the institutions of the Labour Party, demonstrating that while division has proven a constant feature of the PLP's politics, the scale, character and organisation of those divisions have varied considerably over this period, so that these divisions are best understood in terms of broader sequences within the party's post-war history. The chapter also shows that at moments of heightened intra-party regime vulnerability, such as in the late 1970s–early 1980s and following the collapse of New Labour, the legitimacy of the PLP itself has been threatened. In chapter 12, Eric Shaw takes a look at the crisis of party management under Jeremy Corbyn. The two fundamental components of that leadership function – ideological integration and governance legitimacy – seem to have suffered greatly since Corbyn's election, putting party cohesion in danger – the gap between the people who voted for him and the Labour Party MPs being the most visible aspect of that centrifugal movement. The author argues that Corbyn's original use of majoritarian centralist and pluralist techniques has led Labour into what might be termed a 'managerial impasse'. Fiona Simpkins, in chapter 13, examines the current soul-searching crisis experienced by Scottish Labour through an analysis of the party's experience of devolution in light of the two contradictory forces exerted by a traditionally centralised party in a unitary polity on the one hand and an overarching constitutional debate in a devolved environment on the other hand. Her study demonstrates that Scottish Labour's plummeting electoral scores are a clear indication that the partisan electoral strategies of the UK Labour Party are no longer suitable for a Scottish Labour Party having to survive in a political landscape marked by a constitutional divide. In chapter 14, Emmanuelle Avril tries to anticipate the future of Labour organising by looking at successive attempts to 'movementise' the Labour Party, the most recent of which is seen in the Corbyn-supporting Momentum. Taking several recent trends into consideration – such as the rise of new technology tools, of community organising and the opening up of party structures – she examines the deep transformation that the Labour Party is currently undergoing, a mutation that is making the frontiers between the party and the wider community increasingly porous. Will these changes succeed in

galvanising support both inside and outside the party and help reconnect the party with the wider electorate, thus creating a mass social movement ready for government? Or will they alienate the party further from the interests of the voters and turn it into a marginalised protest group?

This book does not claim to be comprehensive. It leaves certain periods uncovered and numerous dimensions that would have been worthy of attention in the shadows. Nonetheless, we believe it can play a useful role, in different and complementary ways. Indeed its main objective is not only to record instances of division, but also the ways the builders of the British labour movement envisioned a possible overcoming of disunity. The rediscovery of such endeavours, we hope, will allow past answers to inform present initiatives, and present controversies to help revisit past experiences in a new light.

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