CfP Different Shades of Red: Rediscovering the Plurality of Socialism and Communism in Europe in the Twentieth Century

Discussion published by Marie-Josée Lavallée on Wednesday, December 14, 2022

International Conference Different Shades of Red: Rediscovering the Plurality of Socialism and Communism in Europe in the Twentieth Century”

October 26-28, 2023, Department of History, University of Montréal, Montréal

The conference will be held in English and French

Organizers: Carl Bouchard and Marie-Josée Lavallée, Department of History, University of Montréal

Socialism and communism were radical democratic projects that aimed at providing a comprehensive solution to the economic, political, and social issues brought about by the fast development of industrial and finance capitalism in the 19th century against the background of the rise of mass society. These projects put forward a vision of the common good championing universal equality, freedom, and social justice, whose flourishing would result from a revolution overthrowing capitalism and establishing collective property and people’s self-government and self-management. Today, however, socialism and communism are still viewed as failed ideologies and reduced to the paradigmatic forms they embodied in history. Socialism is cut down to the so-called postwar social-democratic compromise with capitalism and the ruling classes, which dragged it away from its original commitment to overcome capitalism and empower the proletariat. The Keynesian moment failed to transform social relations and was short-lived. Communism also turned its back on this ideal, but even worse, it morphed early on into one-party systems that created authoritarian, centralized, repressive, police, and even dictatorial states, which allowed for new class privileges rather than abolishing them. While these failures are undeniable, bounding our appraisal of socialism and communism to them made us forget that they were radical democratic projects and encompassed a diversity of practices and theories.

Interrogating the movements, organizations, parties, factions, and theories in rupture with mainstream socialism and communism, which often flourished out of a
refusal to endorse the latter’s perceived renunciation of the emancipatory projects they put forward, provides a privileged vantage point to rediscover the radical democratic nature and the plurality of these ideological political complexes. Unnumerable men, women, and young people who struggled to build an egalitarian, free, and just society for all did not endorse all the practical and theoretical twists and turns of mainstream socialism and communism in their historical deployment. Their oppositional stance marginalized them and sometimes exposed them to repression and purges within their own ranks, and at times cost them their freedom or lives.

Historians, philosophers, and political scientists are neither the sole nor the main ones responsible for the historical void surrounding these alternative practices and theories because the dominant actors were careful to nip in the bud the “deviationist” trends and to shut dissident voices, thus leaving few testimonies of these contestations. Also, given that alternative and innovative visions were less diffused, they left fewer traces. This conference intends to make these voices heard and map the practices and theories labeled as either ‘radical’, ‘oppositional’, ‘left revolutionary’, ‘leftist’, ‘ultra-leftist’, or ‘dissident’ in different countries, and innovative figures, theories, institutions, and movements, in order to produce a comprehensive and comparative picture of the currents that made up socialism and communism throughout their historical deployment in Europe in the 20th century.

A collective volume based on the conference papers is planned: thus, papers presented at the conference must not have been previously published. The conference welcomes paper proposals on the following themes (other relevant topics are also welcome):

- Oppositional/left factions within socialist or communist parties
- Ultra-Left factions
- Socialist/communist civic or cultural organizations (youth, women, minorities...)
- Concurrent socialist or communist parties
- Grassroots movements
- The Zimmerwald Movement
The Internationals
Socialist or communist groupuscules
Socialist pacifist strikes or movements
Western Marxism
Council communism
Left communism
Thinkers or activists
Councils from 1917 or in the Eastern bloc
Communists or (Left) socialist parties in the West in the post-1945 era
Communist dissidence in the Eastern bloc

Confirmed keynote speaker: Talbot Imlay, University Laval, Québec (Canada)

Other keynote speakers are to be confirmed.

Please send your abstract of 300-500 words to marie-josee.lavallee@umontreal.ca on January 13, 2023, at the latest.

A conference fee of 175$ (Canadian dollars), which covers meals (two breakfasts, two lunches, snacks, and a dinner), must be paid at the time of online registration by September 16, 2023, at the latest.

You can visit the conference’s website (which will be regularly updated) at http://www.differentshadesofred.com.

Related date:
October 26, 2023