

## Ken Coates and socialist renewal

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*'It is all very well to agree that we are in favour of ... industrial democracy in Britain, a society planned and free, economically advanced but morally alive. It is even good to agree that we must not stand idly by ... The real question is, given all these things, what do we do next?'*

*A Future for British Socialism?*

*Ken Coates, 1968*

In October 2012, I 'discovered' Ken Coates. I say 'discovered', but I'd heard of Ken more than ten years before this date in connection with anti-war campaigning. What I really mean is that I started to read and think about Ken's very many books, articles and his political activities.

The circumstances of this discovery are worth re-telling, if only because they demonstrate the reach and enduring influence of Ken's ideas. Leo Panitch – editor of the *Socialist Register*, student of Ralph Miliband, and eminent political economist – visited Nottingham to deliver a lecture on his book *The Making of Global Capitalism*. At the opening of the lecture, Panitch asked: 'who in the audience has heard of Ken Coates?' Despite knowing the name, I didn't raise my hand. Neither did anyone else in the room.

Panitch went on to explain that the last time he visited Nottingham was in the 1970s, whilst completing his PhD, and the sole purpose of the trip was to meet Ken. On this recommendation, I ordered a copy of Ken's collection of essays *Beyond Wage Slavery* and was captivated. Two things impressed me about the essays. Firstly, the constant challenges to the reader: 'what next?', 'if we can't do this what can we

*The author is compiling an annotated bibliography of Ken Coates' extensive writings.*

do?', 'why not?' These essays are no meander around some aspect of history or theory; they are sharply written expositions with a practical purpose in mind. Secondly, the range of ideas covered – democracy, education, the Labour Party, the Belgian General Strike, the environment – spoke of a socialist actively engaged in many causes. Particularly impressive is that, as early as 1972, Ken was writing about the environment in these terms:

'Industrial, political and social democracy are not ... dispensable attitudes, transitory systems of administration. They must be at the very core of any strategy for the defence of [the] environment, if we are not to see a situation in which the very squalor of capitalism becomes a pretext for riveting its basic institutions and impulses even more firmly and inflexibly on an increasingly reluctant society.'

*'Democracy and the Environment'*

Forty-three years later, we find Naomi Klein writing in similar terms in her book *This Changes Everything*.

First and foremost, through these essays Ken is addressing himself to the Labour Movement. The purpose of his writing is not to mobilise some lacuna of collective thought and compliance but to challenge and organise activity in the movement as a whole. As I was to discover, from the early 1960s onwards, Ken was involved in efforts to mobilise, organise and educate the Labour Movement on a socialist basis. There were several vehicles through which this was achieved: *The Week* – 'a news analysis for socialists', the Centre for Socialist Education, the *Voice* newspapers, a variety of conferences and meetings and, centrally, the Labour Party. Up until the later 1960s, Ken was a member of a variety of far-left groups and, together with Pat Jordan, founded what was to become the International Marxist Group. In the first years of the IMG's formation, *The Week* was the group's main publication, but its character was very different from what you might imagine the publication of a tiny radical group to be. First and foremost, it was in no way self-referential, self-aggrandising or other-worldly. *The Week* enjoyed sponsorship from a variety of Labour Movement figures, members of Parliament and socialist intellectuals. Under Ken's joint editorship of the journal with Robin Blackburn, the struggles of the global labour movement and oppressed peoples were projected into the consciousness of socialist activists in Britain. As Ken wrote in the Editorial of the first issue:

'Socialists today have a difficult and prodigious task in remaining both active as socialists and keeping conversant with the significance of a whole plethora of national and international events, large and small. In a world where a relatively

minor occurrence in a small and little-known country like Laos has the potential of triggering events of nuclear and global significance, the need for detailed and accurate information in a precise and useful form cannot be denied.’

Throughout the 1960s, Ken and a growing band of comrades worked to make socialist ideas relevant to the realities of the British Labour Movement and to organise sharp interventions into the living and breathing organisations of this movement. Ken’s attack on the Wilson government’s supplicant relationship with the US over the war against Vietnam was not simply the outraged response of a morally offended individual, but the expression of a growing movement of discontent. The Institute for Workers’ Control was not a political front marshalling imaginary battalions, but an organic expression of a substantial movement within the trade unions and Labour Movement more widely.

These activities were guided by a perspective rooted in the working class movement, informed by international events and concerns, inspired by contemporary intellectual developments, but driven by the imperative to make ideas a reality. This perspective endured and is neatly summarised in Ken’s introduction to *How to Win? Labour versus unemployment*, published in 1981:

‘The debate within the Labour Movement in the late nineteen seventies raised many crucial issues about political organisation. All of these are burningly relevant to the political economy of the late ’eighties. Their resolution is a task for a vast movement of people, not for a cabal of scholars. These people will be taking part in a transformation with implications for an area far wider than the geography of one small rainy island. All the signs are that the size of the challenge will condition the scope of the response.’

The full extent of Ken’s influence and the individuals and organisations with whom he worked cannot be given justice in a few hundred words of reflection. Such a consideration is long overdue but the aim here is to start an urgent discussion. Ken Coates was not a guru, a prophet or messiah. His story does not provide all of the answers to all of the questions we now face. But Ken’s work – his voluminous writings and political initiatives – is a vital reference point for those of us determined to build and renew the socialist movement in Britain. It is a vital reference point for those of us who see the connections between the continuing drive to war, environmental degradation, economic crisis, social cruelty and political dishonesty.

Ken’s work is important because it demonstrates the historical existence of ‘another socialism’: a socialism rooted in practical reality, informed by international concerns and a sense of moral urgency. The work of renewing socialism can find no more powerful reference point than this.